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**KAREN FOLEY:** Welcome back to the Student Hub Live event for early childhood studies. This session is about reflective thinking and practise. And I'm joined by Sue Callan, who is a tutor-- an associate lecturer with the Open University. But you've also been very much involved with play and creativity. But before I ask you how you got involved with all of that, Sue, we've been having some questions in the chat. We've been talking in the previous session about placements. About finding access to children to be able to observe to test some of the ideas that are going to come out in the module material. Some people have been talking, H.J., about how they might have access to children. Some have got children--

**H.J.:** Yes.

**KAREN FOLEY:** --with, therefore, no time to go and observe other children, maybe. So tell us some of the things that people have been saying, and then I'd like to ask Sue about what she tells her students.

**H.J.:** There's quite a few people who are saying they have children on their own. So Karima has a six-month-old baby. Stacey has a 20-month-old boy. Alice has been working in a private day nursery for a few years, and she says she loves mud play and forest schools and activities like that.

**KAREN FOLEY:** There's been some test freedom.

**H.J.:** Yeah. [LAUGHTER] Apparently, yes.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Vincent is also drinking a lot of coffee. [LAUGHTER]

**H.J.:** I really like Gareth's comment as well. He says, I don't have children, but he has a lot of nephews and a lovely niece. And her being the oldest, she's perplexed him, because she'd always say everything. But now she's older and teenager, she's bottling it all up. So he's decided to go on a BSE in child psychology to give it a shot, see if he can understand what's going on there.

**KAREN FOLEY:** A Drastic measure, but one I'm sure will be worthwhile, nonetheless.

**H.J.:** But lots of people volunteering in local playgroups, at their church, doing childminding as well. So there's lots of different experiences here.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So people are being very creative about the way that they're able to access and interact with various groups of people. Is that what you find, Sue, with your students?

**SUE CALLAN:** Yes. I've already had contact with my student group. And somebody contacted me during last week to say they've got three children under five, so a placement was going to be a challenge, to say the least. So I would say that if people contact their tutors if they've got any concerns, then they're going to get some reasonable advice. But also, I think what's nice about what's coming in there is people recognising the value of the experience that they've got, and that everybody's got something to bring to the module.

So placement absolutely isn't a fundamental requirement. As Natalie said, you know, it's something that could enhance the experience if you're able to do things. But I told my particular student last week that she would surely be going places with her children, and toddler club or play park or whatever. And those are the places where she would have opportunities to kind of think about types of play and the way that children engage with play.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So Sue, I wonder if you could tell us a bit about how you got involved in play and creativity as an area. And most importantly, I guess, how that links to this whole topic that we're talking about right now, which is reflection and reflective practise.

**SUE CALLAN:** OK. Well, here's me. I'm not going to admit to how many decades ago this was, but I started as a adventure playground leader. And we had a hut with some fairly basic conveniences, a wood-- quite a large woodland-- a fire pit, and some tyres. And we had lots and lots of children. But I pretty soon had to learn that even though my job title said something like play leader, it wasn't all about me. So it was one of those situations where I had to find-- I was there to facilitate the children in whatever they were doing in a very free and open environment.

I might be called upon to organise thing-- to resolve disputes. But-- and I might be asked to join in the play, but I would be joining in as a playmate, not as a play leader. And I think once you have worked with children in that way, which is very open and democratic, it's quite hard to take a career decision where you're going to be working them in different ways. So, I mean, reflecting on reflection, that's a little story just by way of saying that that experience I know has influenced every career decision I have made so since. So I didn't become a classroom

teacher. I stayed in community education. I stayed in early years. My qualifications is in further and higher education, because that is about the way I prefer to work.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So would you say, then, that that opportunity for you at that time, when so much was going on, to sort of take a side step and really reflect on your practise and think, what am I doing, and is this what I want? Did that change, then, your career direction, and this that something that sort of makes reflection such an important thing in terms of getting the outcome that you want?

**SUE CALLAN:** It did. Yes, it did, Karen. I went there thinking, well this will be good experience, because I might want to-- I would want to be a teacher. But I found that actually, I couldn't be a teacher. I couldn't go back into a closed environment with children, having worked outdoors and in that very--

**KAREN FOLEY:** But equally, you have a very brilliant experience of something really vibrant that you clearly love. But you didn't have an experience, so how did you use ref-- of being a teacher, for example. So you discounted one option and said, I'm going with this route. You're reflective practise enabled you to make those decisions that were right for you at the time. But I want to get to grips with this idea of what is this reflective thinking, bearing in mind that you actually don't really know which other option, you know, what it looks like. So how do you, then, reflect on things, and how do you take those steps forward to make sure that you're doing the right thing?

**SUE CALLAN:** OK, yeah. So right, what is reflective thinking. It's always a hard one to explain. What I would say to students to start off with is that it would be really helpful in the run up to the module start for them to think about their own journey and the things that brought them to this point. So that contribution from, I think, Gareth, you know, was quite significant about why he's chosen to do psychology.

That is a good example of reflection going on there. But reflective thinking. It's a way of thinking. It's a way of being. It's being very conscious about a thought process. We all do reflect in a day-to-day kind of way, and it's the kind of problem solving stuff about, well, how am I going to get here today? You know, what's the best route? What's the best time of day? What are the variables in terms of which motorway I'm going to travel on? You're looking at all sorts of different possibilities and coming to a position, a decision.

So reflecting as a conscious process in an academic context and studying helps students to look at the experiences that they've had before, review those, and question them in the light of

looking at the module materials, and having the experience of seeing what is on offer and the different theories and ideas that are offered within the module. Because in day-to-day life, we're not that conscious, really, of our thoughts and where they come from. We have observed-- received wisdom from family and culture and background and all sorts of things. So reflective thinking is just about questioning. Being really prepared to look at what we think, and the assumptions that we make, and being open to new ideas.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. Based on the information you've got. But tell me then, so what's the difference, then, between reflecting in this sort of way on your own thing, and also reflective practise, which is something quite different.

**SUE CALLAN:** Yes. And I suspect that people who are not in practise are thinking, oh, maybe I'm in the wrong place. I'm in the wrong place, I shouldn't be-- so if we think about reflective thinking as generating some kind of action or change, then the notion of reflective practise applies to everybody. So students that come who are practitioners working with children have the experiences, the materials, and the module, and that will give them, maybe, new perspectives on what they're doing. The idea would be, hopefully, then, that they can see better or more democratic ways of engaging with children and making provision for play. The people who aren't in practise are not disadvantaged, though, because they've got the experience of the materials and the way that ideas are presented to them.

And they might find that, actually, their change action-- their reflective practise-- is much more about thinking about changing ideas and the assumptions that they had. For example, not very many people are terribly keen on messy play. But actually, once we have worked through the module materials, and they've read Menna's chapter, perhaps, in the textbook, and thought about what children bring to messy play, what they get out of messy play, and the way it contributes to their well-being. That could be a significant change in the way that they then work with their own children.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And we'll hear a lot more about that later when we talk to Menna. So this whole idea, then, about reflective practise is really about this idea that assumptions that we have might not be the best thing. So we might have a very strong preference for something, but by using reflective practise, we're able to appreciate the strengths and benefits of different ideas within different settings.

**SUE CALLAN:** Yes. This can be quite tricky for students-- especially new students-- to get hold of, because

within the module, we bring a lot of different theories and ideas and philosophies of play. But we don't actually give more value to one than the other. We have a position in the module, which we ask students to think about. But we-- we're really asking students to absorb what's there. Enjoy the experience of exploring those ideas, and then think themselves what that then means for their own values and beliefs about play. So the anxiety comes from the fact that there's not a right or wrong answer, whereas students kind of-- inexperienced students tend to like certainty. So reflection doesn't offer you that security, but actually, it's quite liberating if you think there's no right or wrong answer but you just are responding in a thoughtful way to the experiences that you've had.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. Well, we'd asked people, Sue, whether reflection was something that they felt comes naturally to them. And 77% said yes, possibly indicating why people are coming into this field in the first place, because it is often people who are very open to new ideas, et cetera, who might start studying early childhood studies. But that is a very positive sign, and it's very important for students to be open to that idea of being reflective throughout their learning journey.

**SUE CALLAN:** Yes, and not be threatened by it. As I said, you know, there's no right or wrong. And actually, what they will find is that tutors-- because we all come from different backgrounds as well-- we've all got our own ideas. And I might not agree with the next tutor, you know, about what's the most important type of play. So that debate is really stimulating, and it should be fun.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. Now, we just wanted to end by encouraging students to post messages and contributions on their tutor group forums. And I know that we've had some students in the chat saying, when am I getting my tutor? I was so jealous because you've got some of your students already, and I don't have any of mine. But it's all in a sort of massive process of making relationships between the current students and the tutors, and doing all of those administrative processes that get the tutor groups together. Get the forums set up, all the tutorials arranged, et cetera.

And all of those will be coming up very soon on your student homepages. So you'll start to get the details of all of those events as they're populated. Don't worry. The models aren't open yet. You're early. So they will come in time, but don't panic about all of that. But when they do, Sue, what's your top tip, as an associate lecturer here, about what students should do in terms of making contact with other students on the forum and with their tutor?

**SUE CALLAN:** My top tip is to be prepared to be brave, actually. And be involved. I mean, that-- we've got lots of people kind of in the hub live already, obviously. But it takes that engagement and the opportunity to enjoy the company of others that makes a difference for distance learners. Because actually, you can work home alone, but most of the fun is being involved in forums. So-- and having contact with your tutors. So tutors will be contacting. As soon as they know who their students are, they will make contact with them. Respond to your tutor. Use your tutor to answer all those little niggling concerns about placements, or study skills, or whatever. And there will be tutor group forums.

My tutor group will be about 20 people, which is a nice kind of cosy number to get to know. And if you can be prepared to post messages into the tutor group forum, and respond, and contribute your ideas, that's a little dialogue you're having with other people in a safe space. Because nobody is going to be saying, oh, that's wrong, or that's right, or whatever. But it's part of joining the learning community. So that would be a very small step, a very small start to being involved in the tutor group forum. And then maybe get the confidence to go to tutorials.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Now, Sue, we'll be seeing more of you later, and I want to move onto the next session. But before I do, H.J., are there any other questions that relate to tutors or tutorials that have already covered?

**H.J.:** And I think we got some good stuff. I'd just like to go to Rosie's comment as well, which I think is showing more about what she intends to do. She says, I'm hoping to volunteer at school. She has three children. She's studying, working, and her husband's on shift, so very busy life. But in the future, she aims to work a school full time, which is nice that she's got a goal already that she's working towards. I think as well Daphne is due to become a mum in January. So she'd like to know any advice about how to fit around study, or is there anyone she should let know? Is there anything that the tutor can do?

**SUE CALLAN:** Tutor, tutor, tutor. We like to know those kind of things. And there's always a way of coping. There's always a way of managing.

**H.J.:** I think we have a question as well from Gareth. He's asked quite a specific one based on a TMA. And Helen Leigh who's joined us in the chat being very useful, providing us with lots of information. It's right that it's very good to ask your tutor about this one, but maybe you could help us. How would you generally gauge whether to go quite detailed when you're writing a TMA or keep it quite broad? What would your advice be?

**SUE CALLAN:** Oh, well, I don't know what level Gareth's studying at, obviously--

**H.J.:** It's level one at the moment.

**SUE CALLAN:** OK. Well, usually-- and I don't know what module that Gareth's studying, actually. Do you know what--

**KAREN FOLEY:** I think he's in 102, isn't he?

**H.J.:** Yes.

**SUE CALLAN:** Well, the thing is with any assignment brief, there's a suggested structure, and usually there's an indication of how you might use the word allowance. So the bigger the word allowance, the more detail. The smaller the word allowance--

**KAREN FOLEY:** The tutor notes-- the student notes, even are basically gold dust. They tell you exactly what sort of thing. So Gareth, I think it's brilliant you're starting your assignments, but you should also, like, read the module material as well as you're going through. And look at those notes, because they will give you a clear indication. If you're asked for one example, it is often one example. But again, that whole issue of breadth and depth is a really difficult one. I guess one thing I would say, though, Sue, from an AL perspective, is that we're assessing students on the module material that we provide. And so to some extent, it depends on how in depth that module material is, and whether or not you're asked to go outside of that. And those are important things to bear in mind there also.

**SUE CALLAN:** Yes.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Right. We'll have more later. If we haven't answered your questions, we certainly will do in the next hour and a half. We're going to have a little break now, where I'm going to show you the Briggs building, another building on campus. And then, we're coming back to talk about why play and creativity are so important. But keep that chat coming. We will address questions and your ideas and your situations as we're going through. So please do keep chatting, but we'll see you in a couple of minutes after this short video.

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