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Title Early years practitioners' understandings of professionalism: where do qualifications, theory and practice fit in?

Submitter Prof. Sue Smedley, Dr. Kate Hoskins

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How do early years practitioners construct what it means to be professional? How do they perceive the relationship between theory and practice? What value do they attach to qualifications? This paper explores these questions, drawing on data from interviews with early years practitioners, carried out as part of a Froebel Trust funded study.

The context for examining early years' practitioners' understanding of professionalism is a tension between practice shaped by assessment-oriented discourses, and practice informed by theorists such as Froebel, who prioritise respect for children and their interests. Background information is provided about the limitations of government demands (Osgood, 2006, 2010; Taggart (2011), goal-oriented discourses (Urban, 2008) and the 'schoolification' of the early years (Van Laere et al, 2012, p. 527) and the contemporary relevance of Froebel's ideas (Bruce, 2012; Tovey, 2013).

Shaping this context, is the government's commitment to a version of professionalism that seems straightforward,

'The daily experience of children in early years settings and the overall quality of provision depends on all practitioners having appropriate qualifications, training, skills and knowledge and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.' (DfE 2017, 3.20, p. 21)

However, such statements do not take into account the complexity and affective dimension of professionalism (Dalli, 2008; Simpson 2010). There is a wider context of gendered assumptions about early years work (Smedley, 1996) and issues relating to the labour market, qualifications, salaries and the affordability of childcare (Urban, 2012). Debates about qualifications and professional status are not new to early years work (Ritchie, 2015; Urban and Dalli, 2008) but the introduction of Early Years Teacher status in 2014 in England represents a policy change that has heightened the debate.

There is theoretical debate, in England and elsewhere, for example, Australia (Barber, 2002); New Zealand (Grey, 2011); Finland (Moriarty, 2000); Sweden (Kuisma and

Sandberg, 2008) about the concept of professionalism. Lindon (2012) uses the analogy of a battery, to challenge a limited idea of professionalism as something to be attained by being 'charged-up with knowledge' (p. 34). Oberhuemer (2005) questions 'traditional notions of professionalism, notions which distance professionals from those they serve' (p.13). In our study, professionalism is understood as socially constructed and contextualised (Grey, 2011) and as an on-going process, with 'all the complexities of learning itself' (Smedley, 1996, p. 24).

This study draws on qualitative methodology to explore the participants' lived experiences (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) from their perspectives. Thirty-three semi-structured interviews provided rich data covering the participants' early childhood experiences, early years training and professional experiences, principles and approaches to practice. The data were analysed 'as intertwined phases of knowledge construction' (Kvale, 2007: 20). The initial coding of the data was informed by Straussian techniques (Strauss, 1987) to keep an open approach to emerging analytical frameworks. Thorough thematic data coding and analysis patterns of experience and perception in relation to professionalism, and the role of qualifications, theory and practice were highlighted. The analysis is underpinned by theories of identity and language (Bakhtin, 1986; Hollway, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). It takes a dialogic perspective on the construction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978, Britzman, 2003).

The research complies with ethical protocols (BERA, 2011, University of Roehampton, 2011). Procedures followed include obtaining informed consent, respecting confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms.

Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that the practitioners are constructing versions of professionalism which contrast with technical and qualification-driven government discourses. Sandra, for example describes an affective interpretation of professionalism:

I'd rather have a practitioner who's warm and affectionate, supportive, engaging and very intuitive and willing to listen to a child and support them any day in comparison to someone who walks in with a whole long list of accolades behind them ... It's not necessarily the degree, but it's the kind of professional who would make a huge difference in a child's early years. (Sandra, p. 24)

The study also shows that many practitioners position theory and qualifications as distinct from practice. They do not readily acknowledge a constructive relationship between theory and practice and they experience difficulties in articulating a theoretical basis to explain their practice in general.

We argue that a dialogic pedagogical approach to professional development would help to create articulate early years professionals, able to be advocates who can justify their principles and practice as well as see the dialogic and practical relation between the two.

Finding a place for theories - and our interest is in the contemporary relevance of Froebel's theories - would support early years practitioners as articulate advocates for quality early childhood education. Emotional engagement and concern for children's welfare and development are argued to be central strands in developing a hopeful, motivated and capable professional workforce, able to work effectively in the challenging current context of increasing statutory pressures towards performativity, regulation and control.

Urban (2008) describes how early childhood practitioners are expected 'to achieve predetermined, assessable outcomes' and are 'increasingly being told what to do, what works and what counts' (p. 139). He highlights how this policy-driven expectation clashes with his understanding that early childhood practitioners' work is rooted in human interactions, which are unpredictable and complex. It is that process of interaction which constructs a meaningful version of what professionalism is. This perspective resonates closely our analysis of the perceptions of the practitioners in this study. Specialist knowledge should not be disregarded, but considered alongside pedagogical style and practice, and collaboration. Knowledge is anchored to 'attitude' (Kuisma and Sandberg, 2008, p. 189). Simpson (2010) states that professionalism relates to 'dispositions and orientations' (p. 6), which help to construct a version of professionalism based on 'ground-up perspectives' (Dalli, 2008, p.183).

This paper offers a starting point to highlight practitioners' conceptual constructions of the role played by qualifications, theoretical understanding and practical experience in professionalism. Their perceptions do not align easily with dominant discourses. Shifts in policy are needed to acknowledge a more developmental version of professionalism and to create space and ongoing opportunities for practitioners to explore and develop confident and theoretically-informed professional identities.

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In September 2014, the first courses leading to Early Years Teacher Status began in universities and schools in England; for the first time, early years educators were able to qualify specifically as early years teachers with Early Years Teacher (EYT) status, equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status (DfE, 2013). These policy developments are the latest in a long history of change in the sector, where debates about the need for qualified professionals to work with young children have persisted for decades (Ritchie, 2015; Urban and Dalli, 2008).