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Title Higher education provision and access for early years educators: localised challenges arising from national policy

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Abstract 150 words

Much has been written about the significant attempts to increase the 'professionalization' of the early years sector over the past 20 years (DfE, 2005, 2013, 2017; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Osgood, 2006, 2009; Urban, 2010). A key feature of these policy interventions has been to focus on creating a graduate workforce (Calder, 2008; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010).

In this paper we explore the challenges facing early years settings in different geographical locations in England as they work towards ensuring compliance with the one graduate in each setting policy initiative. We draw on data from our recent Froebel Trust funded project, which involved interviews with 33 early years practitioners in six settings, to argue that at the local level, there is uneven access to higher education for those seeking to gain graduate status and to explore the implications of this uneven access for early years practitioners.

1000 word paper

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). Recently, these debates have centred on how to deliver high quality childcare and education whilst maintaining cost thresholds low enough to allow parents to access the services (DfE, 2013). More broadly, both in the UK and internationally early years educators' professional status has been affected by the historical and contemporary gender imbalance of early years settings, particularly the assumption that this is 'women's work' (Apple, 1986). The contemporary situation contrasts with the historical lack of legislation in

early years, which previously had been the domain of autonomous professionals, trained according to the philosophies of theorists such as Froebel and allowed to operate without the pressures of regulation (Hoskins and Smedley, 2015).

This paper draws on data collected for a Froebel Trust funded project exploring the higher education pathways taken by early years practitioners from six settings, to understand the compliance challenges they have faced as they strive to meet the early years policy demands. We argue that our participants' higher education experiences are defined by localism, with those in urban areas at a significant advantage when compared with their contemporaries in rural areas.

In addition, we argue that the emphasis on early years educators being pushed to gain graduate status has resulted in a context that emphasizes practice driven by statutory requirements to ensure school readiness amongst young children, and a move away from practice informed by Froebel's ideas, which prioritise child-led approaches to learning in early years settings (Bruce, 2012; Tovey, 2013). Our project has a particular interest in identifying the possibilities to enact Froebelian principles in practice.

In this paper, we draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Waquant: 1992) theory of social and cultural capital to explore the influence of localism on the participants' ability to access higher education. We use capital theory to analyse the participants' higher education pathways with a focus on the forms of education received and any challenges they experienced when trying to access HE in their local areas. The life history interview data provided insights into the participants' social class position and revealed their experiences of and access to valued forms of social and cultural capital that could be useful to their higher education journeys.

The study draws on a qualitative methodology to explore the participants' lived experiences (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) from their perspective. A qualitative methodology and use of life history interviewing provided us with insights into the participants' worlds through their eyes, giving their meanings and understandings of their experiences and aspirations (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Over a 13-month period, we carried out life history interviews with 33 early years practitioners from six early years settings, with different demographic features: two in rural locations, two in towns and 2 in cities. The demographic spread has highlighted the influence that context has on policy enactment. Localism has been shown to impact on education policy enactment in

distinctive and significant ways. These include, local demographics (i.e. rates of relative poverty, social class background and quality of education), access to financial resources and access to qualified teaching staff (see for example Ball et al, 2012: Chowdry, and Sibieta, 2011).

The study complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) revised ethical guidelines; the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002) ethical guidelines; and the University of Roehampton's ethical guidelines.

The data revealed the importance of local context in terms of the access and possibilities to participate in higher education. The analysis showed that there are significant discrepancies in local provision that relate to context. For example, those participants located in the two rural settings struggled to access EY HE in their local area and had to undertake long journeys (often in excess of 4 hours of travel per day) to gain the required qualifications to work in their settings. As Gillian from Sherwood told me:

There's no universities or anything around here. The closest is over 40 miles away, which is where I did the foundation degree. But as far as that, there's the local college, but I don't even think that's a really good advert anymore and to be honest, my college experience was shocking. I didn't enjoy any of it. I felt like I went backward from school, back into primary school, and they treated you like children, which isn't the way it should be. So I wouldn't ... no, I wouldn't ... I don't value the local college in the slightest.

Yvonne from Green Fields had similar logistical challenges in accessing higher education provision:

My mum would have to drive me to another village to get a bus which was very early in the morning [...] so I had to get the bus at 7am and then I'd be waiting around for another hour in town before college would start [...] Either that or there's this bus service that comes [...] it's like ordering a taxi but it's a bus service... but that's really temperamental so it wasn't until I learnt to drive that I could get there easily so there were a lot of limitations because of living in such a rural area.

Relatedly, almost all of our participants acknowledged that their professional practice is increasingly driven by statutory requirements. They identified the government's emphasis on school readiness, reinforced through their higher education experiences, had reduced the space to engage with practice

informed by Froebel's ideas, which prioritise child-led approaches to learning in early years settings. Our participants identified the pressure to become a professionalized workforce had a detrimental impact on their capacity and autonomy to work creatively with young children.

Preliminary data analysis indicates implications for the early years sector in terms of the need to reconsider and re-evaluate national policies that pay little attention to complexities arising from challenges related to context. The emphasis on professionalising the sector has required settings to ensure their staff are appropriately qualified. But gaining access to high quality higher education providers is a particular challenge for those working in rural settings. The obligation for early years practitioners to pursue higher education has implications for early years settings and raises questions about the kind of professionalism that is needed for quality early years provision.

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