



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

McMahon, Samantha and Dyer, Mary A.

A narrative approach to professional identity

Original Citation

McMahon, Samantha and Dyer, Mary A. (2014) A narrative approach to professional identity. In: EARLI SIG 14 Conference - Learning and Professional Development, 27th - 29th August 2014, University of Oslo. (Unpublished)

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/25317/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

A narrative approach to exploring professional identity in early years practitioners
Round Table Discussion Presentation at EARLI SIG 14 Conference, Oslo, August 2014

The diverse and complex nature of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector, including state, private and voluntary sector providers, stakeholders and types of provision, as well as the myriad range of qualifications held by the current workforce, and the impact of this on the development of a coherent professional identity and role for practitioners, has been noted in the UK (Osgood, 2006, Nutbrown, 2012, Chalke, 2013) and further afield in New Zealand and Australia (Dalli, 2008, Cooke et al, 2013). This may in part be addressed by the streamlining and rebranding of qualifications currently proposed by government (DfE, 2013). However, such repackaging by government bodies does not take into account what practitioners themselves consider their role to be, nor will it necessarily reflect the core values that drew them into the early years workforce in the first place.

Good practice and practitioner roles have been researched in some depth in terms of positive outcomes for children and parents (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, Sylva, 2004, DfES, 2005), but little has been said about how practitioners see themselves and how work-based learning supports the development of professional identity. Practitioners have been found to describe themselves in naive terms (Brownlee et al, 2000), and more comfortably oriented to a discourse of care rather than education (Berthelsen et al 2007). The privileging of an education-oriented discourse within early years practice has been identified which marginalises the affective element of early years practice considered by many to be a vital factor in supporting young children's learning and development (Cooke et al, 2013, Manning-Morton 2006, Isaacs, 1929) and which risks presenting the professional identity of the practitioner in neo-liberal, technicist terms (Chalke, 2013, Moss, 2006).

The development of reflective and critical thinking skills within the teaching of graduate level qualifications, and the recognition of individual experience in the ECEC sector as a professional development resource would afford practitioners personal agency in defining their practice, and the autonomy to develop their professional identity from a personal values base (Osgood, 2006, Moss, 2006). Such an activist approach to professionalisation adopts a self-constructivist stance, acknowledging the right of the individual to define themselves (Chalke, 2013). It would also give equal value to a professional identity which emphasised the educator role, and to one which promoted the support of children's well-being and emotional development as a key factor underpinning their early development and learning, calling into question the necessity and the inevitability of the care/education divide seen by practitioners and service users today in the ECEC sector (Cohen et al, 2004).

In taking such an individual and personal approach to the formation of professional identity, it is important then to hear the voice of the individual practitioner in describing what they consider themselves to be and what they value in their practice. Such exploration of personal concepts requires a methodological approach and data analysis that allows for the voice of the practitioner to be heard and interpreted honestly and accurately in answer to overall research questions:

- What does it mean to be an early years practitioner?
- What is good early years practice?
- What is the practitioner's experience of professionalisation?

Our work, comprising two separate explorations of early years practitioners' professional identities, takes a narrative approach to data gathering and analysis, using semi-structured interviews that encourage the use of stories from the workplace with graduate-level practitioners in England, to explore the lived experience of these practitioners, accepting the proposition that narratives offer "windows on inner lives rather than social worlds" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009, p.7). The experiences of the individual practitioner, the stories they chose to tell about their working lives, will offer insight into what they consider to be the important and salient points about their roles, the ways in which they identify themselves (Lieblich et al, 1998). Whilst data generated by taking a narrative approach centre on the individual, they also offer insight into practitioners' social worlds, their interactions and relationships with others, in a sector concerned now more than ever with multi-agency working. Narrative offers the opportunity to make private experience public (Chase, 2008) and encourages the researcher to listen to the account of the individual per se, rather than to dissect data to arrive at generalised themes and similarities across a group. It is this very personal, private construction of self we are trying to uncover in exploring the individual professional identities of graduate practitioners, in answer to the question 'who do **they** think **themselves** to be', not 'how well do they fit competence-based criteria prescribed by external authorities'. This then may inform the teaching of reflection and critical thinking and support for work-based learning in graduate-level professional education.

Analysis has been undertaken on data gathered to date by either using the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998), developed to support researchers in "keeping respondents' voices and perspectives alive", or the development of monologues from interview data, to convey individual stories in their own words (Lewis 1963). In attempting to be faithful to our participants in our presentation and interpretation of their experiences in portraying professional identity, we are aware that validity and rigour need to be maintained within our research. Our approaches have been selected to ensure the former does not come at the cost of the latter. The validity of our

findings are based on the transparency demonstrated in our presentation and analysis (Polkinghorne, 2007), and the informality of using a story-based approach to generate richer, more personal and honest accounts of experience than might be gained within a more formal interview schedule (Chase, 2008). The independent versions of the same phenomena *'provide a built in check upon the reliability and validity of much of the data and thereby partially offset the subjectivity'* (Lewis 1963 pxxiii).

References

- Berthelsen, D. and Brownlee, J. (2007) Working with toddlers in child care: Practitioners' beliefs about their role. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 22, 347 – 362
- Brownlee, J., Berthelsen, D., Boulton-Lewis, G. and McCrindle, A. (2000) Caregivers beliefs about practice in infant childcare programmes. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 8 (2), 155 - 165
- Chalke, J (2013) Will the early years professional please stand up? Professionalism in the early childhood workforce in England. *Contemporary Issues in early Childhood*, 14 (3), 212 - 222
- Chase, S (2008) Narrative Inquiry: multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In Denzin, N. K and Lincoln, Y. S (2008) *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. 3rd Edition. London: Sage
- Cohen, B., Moss, P., Petrie, P. and Wallace, J. (2004) *A new deal for children? Re-forming education and care in England, Scotland and Sweden*. University of Bristol: Policy Press.
- Cook, K., Davis, E., Williamson, L., Harrison, L. J. and Sims, M (2013) Discourses of professionalism in family day care. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14 (2), 112 - 126
- Dalli, C. (2008) Pedagogy, knowledge and collaboration: towards a ground-up perspective on professionalism. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16 (2), 171 - 185
- DfES (2005) KEEP: *Key elements of effective practice*. Crown Copyright.
- DfE (2013) *More Great Childcare: raising quality and giving parents more choice*. Crown Copyright
- Gubrium, J. F. and Holstein, J. A. (2009) *Analysing narrative reality*. London: Sage
- Isaacs, S (1929) *The Nursery Years: the mind of the child from birth to six years*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Lewis, O., (1963) *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Vintage Books
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. and Zilber, T (1998) *Narrative research: reading, analysis and interpretation*. London: Sage
- Manning-Morton, J. (2006) The personal is professional: professionalism and the birth to threes practitioner. *Contemporary issues in early childhood* 7 (1), 42 - 52
- Mauthner, N. and Doucet, A. (1998) Reflections on a voice-centred relational method: analyzing maternal and domestic voices. In: Ribbens, J and Edwards, R (eds.) (1998) *Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research: public knowledge and private lives*. London: Sage

Moss, P. (2006) Structures, understandings and discourses: possibilities for re-envisioning the early childhood worker. *Contemporary Issues in early childhood*, 7 (1), 30 - 41

Nutbrown, C. (2012) *Foundations for Quality: the independent review of early education and childcare qualifications Final Report*. Crown Copyright

Osgood, J (2006) Deconstructing professionalism in early childhood education: resisting the regulatory gaze. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 7 (1), 5 - 14

Polkinghorne, D. (2007) Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, (4), 471 - 486

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2002) *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. Crown Copyright.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004) *The Effective provision of Pre-school Provision Project: final report*. Nottingham: DfES Publications

Presentation Slides

A narrative approach to exploring professional identity in early years practitioners

Samantha McMahon
Mary Dyer

Purpose of narrative



- ▶ Understanding comes from lots of different places– (Michael Rosen BBC R4 2/4/2014)
- ▶ Sumsion and Goodfellow (2012)– narratives, essentially tell us what happened and why is what happened worth telling.

McMahon and Dyer 2014

The use of narrative

- ▶ Lieblich et al (1998, p.7):
 - *narratives provide us with access to people's identity and personality.*
- ▶ Polkinghorne (2007) - validity for narrative inquiry is a question of how well-argued interpretations are, rather than a judgement on their 'correctness'. Narrative data analysis is not a question of presenting a privileged and sole interpretation of what has been shared but a strong and well-argued, persuasive understanding.

McMahon and Dyer 2014

Data handling

- Researcher seeks to answer the following questions in their handling and analysis. (Sumsion and Goodfellow 2012)
- Abstract-what is the story about-participants experience of becoming an EYP (professionalization)
- Orientation-who, when, where? (Karen, Debbie, Lauren and Emma)
- Complicating action-then what happened? Monologues
- Result/resolution-what finally happened? Monologues
- Evaluation-so what? Why is it worth telling?

McMahon and Dyer 2014

analysis

- Monologues inspired by Bennett and Lewis.
- Participants voice and identity shine, monologues but in relation to others.
- For the participants.
- Their story, my story, our story? Illuminates the details.
- However: More to the data–so what?



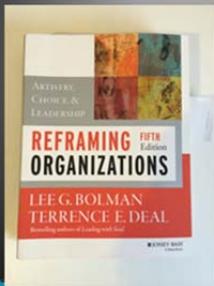
McMahon and Dyer 2014

Bolman and Deal

- ▶ however because multiframe thinking is a way of understanding improvement strategies, and the ways in which the implementation process distorts policymakers intentions (Bolman and Deal 2013) it can be applied to the data to enhance understanding of professionalization.
- ▶ Four Frames-structural, human resource, political and symbolic

McMahon and Dyer 2014

Where the data has taken me
'researcher do your job' Barr (2012)



- ▶ Unexpected turn-organisational and structural issues to the fore.
- ▶ Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013) are concerned with how 'multiframe' (p18) thinking applies to organizations;

McMahon and Dyer 2014

Listening Guide (VCRM)

- Reading 1 for the plot – to confirm initial analysis/offer control for reflexivity
- Reading 2 for the voice of I – to locate the voice of the practitioner
- Reading 3 for relationships
- Reading 4 to place people within cultural contexts and social structures

(Mauthner and Doucet, 1998)

McMahon and Dyer 2014

Narratives on practice

- ▶ Consider why these incidents were chosen:
 - What do they focus on
 - How are they described
 - How are they judged
 - What makes them important/memorable to the practitioner

McMahon and Dyer 2014

Sharing data, your thoughts

- ▶ Comments and questions please

McMahon and Dyer 2014

References

- ▶ Barr, J (2012) Theory and narrative in the production of knowledge. In: Thomson, P and Walker M, ed. *The Routledge Doctoral Student's Companion*. London: Routledge. pp96-107
- ▶ Bennett, A., (1988) *Talking Heads*. London: Random House
- ▶ Bolman, L., and Deal, T., (2013) *Reframing Organisations: artistry, choice and leadership*. 5th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- ▶ Lewis, O., (2011) *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. 50th Anniversary edition. New York: Vintage Books Random House

McMahon and Dyer 2014

References

- ▶ Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. and Zilber, T (1998) *Narrative research: reading, analysis and interpretation*. London: Sage
- ▶ Mauthner, N. and Doucet, A. (1998) Reflections on a voice-centred relational method: analyzing maternal and domestic voices. In: Ribbens, J and Edwards, R (eds.) (1998) *Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research: public knowledge and private lives*. London: Sage
- ▶ Polkinghorne, D. (2007) Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, (4), 471 – 486
- ▶ Sumsion, J., and Goodfellow, J., (2012) 'Looking and listening in': a methodological approach to generating insights into infants' experiences of early childhood education. *Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. Vol 20 (3) 313-327

McMahon and Dyer 2014