Professional Identity in Children & Young People’s Workforce

A Small-Scale Research Study

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The researchers develop and teach on a range of professional courses designed for the children and youth workforce.

Idea for project came from student experiences shared in class and consultancy work with local authorities and the voluntary sector.
Context

- Emerging issues from workforce policy & legislative changes (e.g. ECM and Children Act, 2004) emphasis on multi-agency & multi-professional working

- Significant structural reorganisation of Children’s Services

- Exploring participants personal interpretations of how professional identity could influence or be affected and shaped by integrated working
Methodology

- Small scale - 6 front line workers and 15 managers

- A phenomenological approach based upon ‘lived experiences’ (Nicholson et al 2000)

- Methods included: Reflective Journals ‘day in life of…’ and Focus Groups
Multi-Professional Working ‘Concept Framework’ Anning (2006) Helped to provide initial structure to the emerging themes:

Structural, Ideological, Procedural & Inter-Professional Dilemmas

- Structural: coping with systems/management change
- Ideological: sharing and redistributing knowledge skills and beliefs
- Procedural: participation and reification in delivering services
- Inter-professional dimensions: Learning through role changes

Team or Individual concerns within these (McKimm et al, 2009, Model of Professional Identity)
Appendix 1

- McKimm et al, 2009
Initial Findings: Front Line Staff

- Very focused on client. Often anchored professional identity to these interactions

- Recognition & value from close colleagues – ‘ego’ bound up in how other practitioners perceived them

- Most saw management as ‘problem’ or ‘barrier’, rather than support

- Believed managers don’t understand complexities & demands of different roles – sometimes poor deployment
Pay & conditions important. ‘Loyalty’ to staff key issue in Journals (but context of Single Status)

Feel unsettled by constant change

Little focus on wider early intervention & prevention agenda

Professional Cultures ‘colliding’ but generally positive

Partnerships with parents very strong feature
Initial Findings: Managers

- Key focus on supporting early intervention & prevention agenda (*Bigger Picture*)
- Ego & Power– how role, authority & own professional knowledge is perceived
- Authority – commissioning of services & staff
- Staff Morale - constant struggle
- Reported difficulties recruiting competent, experienced staff
Managers

- Does co-location need a rethink?
- Cross-agency partnership working focus (rather than individual work)
- Need for more shared training to enhance practice
- Importance of developing leadership capacity
- Destabilisation of disciplines & practice – painful but better for service delivery
Overview of Findings

- Front line staff depend on relationships with client group and other colleagues, rather than managers for their professional identity.

- Managers’ professional identity linked to strategic vision and ‘power’ in structure - less dependent on relationships.
Overview of Findings

- Both groups focussed on inter agency working and felt this was positive.

- Pace of change - unsettling for front line staff but more than this, managers moving at a different ‘faster’ pace. For example, re-thinking co-location.

- Therefore lived experiences or context experienced at different times.
Some implications for Professional Identity?

- Professional identity socially constructed: crucially dependent on context

- Important to understand context - this may be experienced very differently. Consider staff deployment example:
  - Managers ‘resigned’ to recruiting and deploying people that may not be suitable due to time pressures and a pool of ‘weak candidates’
  - Front line staff perceive this as managers not understanding what the ‘job’ really entails
Experience of context has a strong emotional dimension - linked to professional identity. Consider issue of Single Status Pay:

- Front line staff experienced this as ‘betrayal’ by their managers. Real anger and upset expressed

- Managers felt they were really ‘fighting’ for their staff (knew often ‘unseen’)

Implications Cont.
Evidence of some cultural consensus and shared discourse about daily work experiences - can lead to strong Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). Consider where many front-line workers ‘anchored’ their sense of professional identity:

- Participants reported high levels of effective communication & commitment to joint problem solving in their day-to-day experiences which ‘validated’ their role/expert contribution.
Building on Anning et al’s (2006) work, there is perhaps a fifth, distinct element in considering multi-professional teams & Professional Identity: the ‘Ego’ Dilemma.

Professional identity is formed at the junction where structural factors & ‘self conceptualisation of the role’ (Brott & Kajs, 2001) meet. This appeared to be concerned with ‘ego’ – how the self is seen.

Findings highlighted where managers and front line workers ‘located’ themselves (Bourdieu) and the importance of social & personal biography (Atkinson, 2004). Needs to take account of cultural factors.
Next Steps

- As providers we need to build understanding of the differences, possibilities and tensions multi-professional working can hold and encourage some shared effort to interpret and support this in a meaningful way.

- Further research required into impact of the emotional experience of context & self-conceptualisation of roles & professional identity.

- Context may change (pace or ‘priorities’ may be different for managers and front line staff), but emotional legacy remains.