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What does it mean  
to be an early years  
practitioner?



Mary A Dyer (University of Huddersfield)



# The Early Years Sector





## Research Aims

- What do early years practitioners regard as their professional role or identity and how is this formed?
- What are the implications for professional education and the development of reflective practice?
- The practitioner point of view



# Methodology

- 23 semi-structured interviews
- All with current experience within early years sector
- Digital recording, written transcripts
- BERA (2011) ethical guidance
- Initial data analysis from 7 participants



# Data analysis

- Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998):
  - Layered approach to data analysis
  - 4 readings – **plot**, voice, relationships, cultural contexts and social structures
  - “keep respondents’ voices and perspectives alive”
- **Thematic** analysis
- Narrative analysis – content, language



# The language of the practitioner

- Brownlee et al (2000) - professional development for the early years workforce needs to:
  - encourage practitioners to reflect on their values and beliefs
  - enable them to support personal belief with more academic, theoretical knowledge
  - To do so effectively, these beliefs and values must be made explicit to the learner in order for them to analyse the validity of their sources and content against their professional experience.
- Berthelsen and Brownlee (2007) - early years practitioners tend to focus in their definitions of their role on aspects of care rather than education, and that the sophistication of their role definitions is influenced more by level of education than amount of experience in early years work.



## Key themes (plot)

- Relationships
- Team working
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Children's emotional well-being
- The unique child
- The child as a constructor of his/her own knowledge





## Moss (2006): discourse of pedagogy

- Child as active learner, constructing their own understanding of the world with sensitive and knowledgeable support:
  - It is up to us to get that learning out of those children ... it's being open as a practitioner to follow the child's lead
  - That practitioner took the time and could see what the child wanted to do
  - You've got to make sure you follow the child's lead



## Osgood (2006)

- Strong personally owned professional identity may only develop when regulatory, competence-based, frameworks are challenged and personally negotiated:
  - If you are confident and articulate what you are doing, not particularly quoting but using the EYFS lingo I think they [OfSTED inspector] do think ‘well you are talking about it and I don’t have to pressure you on that’
  - I always call myself a Registered Child Minder



## Chalke (2013)

- “the essence of day to day practice” – emotional engagement with children and their families, interpersonal skills for team working:
  - Making sure we have a good relationship with the families, that is an important part of what we do
  - You’ve got to be a counselor to the parents
  - Making sure children are happy, feel safe, cared for ... you’ve to have that bond



## Ang (2014)

- The ultimate responsibility of the practitioner – to challenge existing practice, to decide what is good practice:
  - I think what has been imposed on early years settings by the government and you know just Ofsted ... I think we are losing all the ... what's important which is working with the children sometimes
  - If we'd not had the timetable, that little boy's telescope that he'd made, his learning could have been built on and we could have gone back to it but because of the timetable and the routine that had to stop because of the other accidents
  - I don't think it has to be structured as such ... You can do your 3D solids, shapes while you've got your junk modelling ... you've still got to have your tick list but you could still tick them off. You could do it outside, inside but you know we have to have a timetable.



## Hybrid professionalism?

- Hybridized images of professionalism do not emphasize only occupational control (**pure professionalism**) or organizational control (**situated professionalism**) but reflexive control (i.e., **reflexive searches** for a professional use of professionalism) to establish **meaningful connections** between clients, work, and organized action.
- (Noordegraaf 2007)



# Democratic professionalism

Interpreting rather than implementing frameworks

- Relationships
- Collaboration
- Cooperation
- Collegial working
- Networking
- Oberhuemer, 2005



## Discussion

- Do practitioners need to 'play the game' more explicitly to be considered 'professional'?
- Is their identity about laying claim to a democratic professionalism that recognises and values their interpersonal connections with their service users?



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