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What does it mean to be an early years practitioner?

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Introduction

The early years sector has seen considerable change over the last 15 years, moving from what was largely private provision used and funded by parents, to a sector developed and funded by government (although still very much delivered by the private and voluntary sector) in order to meet broader societal needs including improving educational outcomes for children; monitoring and ensuring the safety and well-being of children; offering an affordable service to parents who need or wish to work. This increased attention from government has led to the reframing of regulatory frameworks for registration and inspection of provision, and new employment and qualification opportunities for those wishing to work with young children and their families. However, this change has seldom been driven by the workforce itself, calling into question how practitioners see themselves now in a sector that may be markedly different to then one they originally entered or trained for.

Methodology

This study explores what today's practitioners consider to be their role and their professional identity through semi-structured interviews with 23 early years practitioners, sharing narratives about their own experience. All participants have at least a Level 5 Foundation degree in Early Years; some have also completed the Level 6 'top up' programme to achieve BA Hons Early Years, whilst others were still in the process of doing this at the time of their interview. All have experience of working in at least one type of early years provision, supporting the learning and development of children between birth and 5 years old.

A narrative approach to data gathering offers the opportunity to make private experience public (Chase, 2008) and it is this very personal, private construction of self I wish to uncover. In taking this approach, I aim to understand what they consider to be the important and salient points about

their roles, and the ways in which they identify themselves (Lieblich et al, 1998). Early research into early years practice has focussed on the needs of children and how best these can be supported (for example, Sylva et al, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, et al, 2002), or the impact on the workplace of the introduction of a status for lead practitioners (for example, Brock, 2012; Chalke, 2013), neither of which strands considered what 'ordinary' practitioners felt they were in the workplace to achieve. Work in Australia has led to the classifying of practitioner-articulated constructions of good practice and professional identity as unsophisticated and naïve, demonstrating limited agency in their perceptions of themselves as constructors of knowledge in their field (Brownlee et al, 2000; Berthelsen et al, 2007). However, my own research focus is to identify, in a field where there has been considerable change driven by funders and policy makers, what the prime actors consider their role to be, and in what terms and with what agency this is expressed. This is a field where there is much rhetoric about raising practitioners' qualifications in order to claim a professional status, and I wish to explore if this is in fact missing or rather is being articulated in apparently 'unprofessional' terms.

Findings and analysis

Initial data analysis, drawn from transcripts of interviews with 7 of my participants, has identified a number of key themes. There is an overwhelming sense that the child and his/her individual needs and interests lies at the heart of good practice, and that children's emotional and social well-being underpin any progress in learning or development. Personal commitment and motivation are essential elements of the role of the practitioner as are team working and forming positive and constructive relationships with parents/ carers. Within this paper, I intend to focus on what some of my participants have said about their understanding of their identity and their role in the workplace, and consider what agency they exercise in defining and prioritising their role and responsibilities, and how this is articulated.

Burr (2015) argues that identity is formed through an agentic process of social constructionism, based on an individual's understanding of their world that is socially and historically situated.

Osgood (2006) concurs with this stance, arguing that practitioners need to negotiate their way through current regulatory frameworks and sector discourses to determine what they personally consider to be good practice and the priorities of their role. However, this may conflict with other understandings of what the purpose of early years provision should be and how the sector should be managed and held accountable for the service it provides. Burr (2015) makes the point that individuals' understanding of their world should match acceptable, shared understandings of that world, suggesting a level of compliance with wider cultural and social perceptions, raising the question of what the hegemonic perceptions are and who they emanate from – senior colleagues, regulators, funders, service users? Foucault (Rabinow, 1984) argues that in defining ourselves, we make use of the many social structures we are familiar with, to give authority to our concepts and to legitimise our sense of place. Within the early years sector this is seen in the development of regulatory and quality assurance frameworks and their associated record keeping, but this may result in practice becoming a matter of ensuring specific things are seen to be done at all times. Throughout the data gathering for this study, practitioners frequently made reference to the materiality of their practice – observation reports, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) profiles, Development Matters (Early Education/DfE, 2012), OfSTED inspections, reports and self-assessment, levels of qualifications. However, when professional identity becomes a matter of demonstrating how regulatory standards are being met (Osgood, 2006, 2010), this renders the practitioner as little more than a skilled technician working within an imposed framework (Oberhuemer, 2005), and may deny practitioners the space they need to consider what they personally regard as good practice (Osgood, 2006).

Strong, personally owned professional identity may only develop when such frameworks are challenged (Osgood, 2006), a process which Ang (2014) sees as the ultimate responsibility of the practitioner, and which Moss (2006b, p.36) describes as the “worker as researcher”, a practitioner who is constantly learning, questioning, contributing to the development of knowledge, and reflecting on and questioning received knowledge. Such a stance would confer a level of agency and power on the practitioner in determining what their professional role and priorities should be,

implying a degree of autonomy associated with self-governing professions, a status the current overseer of early years provision the DfE, feel requires development in early years provision (CWDC, 2010; DfE, 2013).

Overall, my participants have so far identified a professional identity and perception of good practice that values the child and his/her interests and life circumstances, and embodies a commitment to supporting children in reaching their full developmental potential. They acknowledge the need to comply with regulatory frameworks, legislation and, to some extent, a standards-driven agenda in early years provision. They recognise the team-working element of early years practice as vital to meeting children's developmental needs, supporting Oberhuemer's (2005) concept of 'democratic professionalism', which includes interpersonal and communication skills and key elements of good practice, along with the ability to form and maintain relationships within and beyond the staff team.

In discussing what they consider their roles to be, they regard care for, and commitment to, children and their families to lie at the heart of their practice. Practitioners regard their engagement with parents as instrumental in informing their support for the children, and also report it as much more than casual conversation at the beginnings and ends of sessions:

Make sure we have a good relationship with the families, that is an important part of what we do ... to build up that relationship with those parents and support that child through the families as well (Practitioner 1)

You've got to be a counsellor to the parents (Practitioner 2)

My participants also frequently prioritised establishing children's emotional security and valuing their interests, but in general, everyday language, giving it almost the status of common-sense knowledge:

The more interested the more learning goes on and the more they think more and deeper questions (Practitioner 3)

Making sure that children are happy ... if the children are happier they learn more effectively (Practitioner 4)

... I think social and emotional development is such a big thing ...making sure children are happy, feel safe, cared for ... you've got to have that bond and attachment ...before they're going to develop any of the other areas (Practitioner 5)

However, it is their articulation of their understanding of their identity and role that may be what leads others – parents/carers, related agencies in health, education and social work, the general public – and even themselves, to regard what they do as the embodiment of a disposition to care that cannot be trained or educated, but may only be the result of a natural, maternal instinct. Moss (2006a) identified this as a limited perception of early years provision, describing it as a discourse of childcare, a narrow concept that focussed on the provision of a substitute mother figure for children, and the importance of early attachment. Such a view of practice required little regulation or quality assurance, based as it was on the premise that this was natural work for women, utilising a generally shared and in-built maternal instinct. More recently, he argues, the discourse of the early years sector has developed into what he termed 'pedagogical discourse' (Moss, 2006a, p. 73), a more complex concept that views the young child as an active learner, constructing their own understanding of the world, and requiring the sensitive support and guidance of a knowledgeable practitioner. Whilst this includes care and positive relationships as essential elements, it goes beyond an instinctive loving of children to a deeper understanding of their social and cognitive needs and how they should be supported. Practitioners within this study reflect both discourses in their description of their roles:

They're like my second family (Practitioner 2)

I think it is up to us to know how to get that learning out of those children ... it's being open as a practitioner to follow the child's lead (Practitioner 1)

That practitioner took the time and could see what the child wanted to do (Practitioner 4)

However, Moss (2006a) acknowledges that in the UK early years sector, pedagogy is not a term that is always well understood or trusted, or much discussed. In explaining their roles, practitioners prefer to use terminology such as enabler and facilitator rather than teacher or educator, to avoid any misconceptions about the informality of their practice in supporting learning, going to some lengths at times to pull back from any notion that they 'teach':

We do have a couple of activities on the go that goes on all the week through the planning but the children aren't aware that they are structured activities (Practitioner 1)

This lack of use of, or confidence in using, 'expert' terminology, may be what contributes to the apparently simplistic language practitioners use to describe their roles, so that they appear to spend their time playing with children when in fact they are engaged in much more complex guiding, supporting, monitoring and assessing of learning, often at the level of the individual child. Chalke (2013) supports Moss' account of the change in discourse within the early years sector, arguing that practitioners should develop and articulate their own pedagogical principles, acquiring the specialist knowledge they require to do so.

Chalke (2013) further notes that whilst there is now greater recognition of the pedagogic role of the practitioner working with children over the age of 3, care and nurturing is still regarded as the main focus of practice with the under 3s by many, including some of my on participants:

Even though there's a curriculum from birth, I think it's more to do with the social and caring side from that age (Practitioner 5)

When they're babies it seems like the emphasis is more on care than it is on education (Practitioner 6)

This is a distinction that will serve to undermine professional recognition for this group of workers until they can demonstrate the application of specialist knowledge and professional judgement in their practice so it is no longer regarded as "just something that anyone can do" (Chalke, 2013, p.217). She further argues that emotional engagement with children and their families is a key specialism that should be valued, as should the interpersonal skills that make team working – "the essence of day to day practice" (Chalke, 2013, p.219) - with colleagues within the setting and from outside agencies possible, echoing previous calls (Oberhuemer, 2005; Manning-Morton 2006; Osgood, 2010) for the emotional and affective element of the practitioner role to be more highly valued for the contribution it makes to children's progress and development. Some of my practitioners even feel it sets them apart from others working with young children:

I think they found I had more time to talk to them than the teacher ... I think I built up a better relationship [than the teacher] with the parents. (Practitioner 7)

However, their expertise in this field does not seem to accrue any recognition as underpinning children's emotional security and readiness for learning within the setting, or as contributing to the establishing of strong and positive relationships with parents/carers. It epitomises the assumption made by a traditionally patriarchal society that nurturing is a natural female instinct that requires little teaching and skill and which brings its own intrinsic reward. Colley (2006) cites research by Skeggs (1997) that demonstrates that whilst such caring work may furnish the practitioner with considerable emotional capital, this has only limited exchange value in comparison to economic or cultural capital, and leads to the skills and expertise of the practitioner being devalued as little more than personal disposition. It could be argued that this is exacerbated by practitioners' accounts themselves, which offer little theoretical or research-based insight into why such connection with children and their families is vital to effective early years practice and to children's outcomes.

Conclusion

My initial data analysis of a small sample of practitioners in this study suggests, then, that practitioners do have a clear and personally defined perception of what their role in supporting children's learning and development is. They confidently identify the priorities of their practice, and make it clear that interpersonal skills and relationship formation are key underpinning elements along with a sound knowledge of children's early development. It is perhaps the case that the language they use to articulate these views appears to be too commonplace to have the authority of a self-governing professional group. Moss' (2006a) description of a discourse of pedagogy, has outlined what many of these practitioners would identify as their role and their values, but they still articulate this as care. This 'care' includes having a deep commitment to the child's well-being, valuing the individuality and interests of each child they work with, and to providing opportunities for them to learn and develop as much as is possible:

Every child has all their needs met ...every child is unique (Practitioner 5)

You've got to make sure you follow the child's lead (Practitioner 1)

That practitioner took the time and could see what the child wanted to do (Practitioner 4)

It is perhaps more accurate to render this as caring *about* rather than caring *for* children, but that is a distinction these practitioners have yet to explicitly own, an ownership which would be seen to have greater status if it were expressed in terms of respecting the voice and individuality of the child, and his/her active role in constructing their understanding of the world. Such knowledge is there in regulatory frameworks, policy and legislation and early years research. However, whilst practitioners cling to the everyday language traditionally used to describe their sector and its purpose, their social and cultural capital will be undermined as a result of their practice being viewed as emanating from female instinct rather than specialist, professional knowledge.

Professional educators can address this, in the tone and content of their teaching, and in supporting practitioners to identify the professional judgements and choices they exercise on a daily basis, and to recognise and articulate how these have arisen from an understanding of research and theory and the negotiation of regulation and policy, rather than from an instinct to care and to please. Practitioners themselves need to deepen their understanding of young children's holistic development and learning, in order to acquire the confidence to challenge hegemonic understandings of the purpose of their sector, and negotiate their own way through existing frameworks and hierarchies, the dividing practices (Rabinow, 1984) of the early years sector, so that they find new ways of articulating their expertise and their identity.

Alternatively, we can consider different ways of identifying the professionalism of a workforce that do not require them to conform to traditional definitions but which instead recognise that professionalism may be seen in any workforce that takes responsibility for constructing its own knowledge base, however this is expressed. The concepts of professionalism referred to in this paper (Moss, 2006a, 2006b; Osgood, 2010; Oberhuemer, 2005; Manning-Morton 2006) include a shared understanding of values, a commitment to and respect for service users, and the continuous process of reflecting on and negotiating of taken-for-granted assumptions about practice, all of which indicate a workforce that questions its practice in order to improve. Whilst this does not negate the importance of the role of professional educators in continuing to support

practitioners in their engagement with the theory and research surrounding children's development and learning, or in considering the wider implications of the legislation and policy that regulate their provision, it offers practitioners themselves greater agency in determining what their practice should be and a more powerful, agentic voice in constructing their professional identity, in terms of what they want it to be rather than how others consider it should be expressed.

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