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GOOD PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY:

LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF

THE EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONER

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UNITED KINGDOM

ABSTRACT

The introduction of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), raised the level of early years qualifications to degree standard, acknowledging the need for reflective lead practitioners who “review, analyse and evaluate their own and others’ practice” (CWDC, 2008, p.5), in particular, identifying the key elements of good practice in their own and others’ work, in order to share these with their colleagues. However this raises the question of what these key elements are. Should the role of the practitioner focus on care, children’s safety and well-being, or their education and learning? Can/should early years practice be separated under such headings? Who decides what constitutes good practice?

This paper explores how undergraduate early years practitioners define good practice, and how they use this to evaluate their own practice through reflection. Consideration is given to whether or not there is a link between what is defined as good practice and how undergraduates define their professional role, and also to what extent these concepts are shaped by the individual or external sources. The aim is to consider how students can be supported in reflecting on practice, and developing their own sense of professional identity.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 undergraduates part way through an FdA/BA Hons Early Years programme, exploring what they considered to be good practice and how this supported their reflections, and the development of their professional identity. Thematic analysis (Spradley, 1979) identified a shared belief that good practice was child-centred, including the formation of positive and effective relationships with individual children. However, further use of Listening Guide analysis (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) to locate the ownership of these concepts and hear the voice of the practitioner (Belenky et al, 1986, Johns, 2004) highlighted that ‘good practice’ was identified as a somewhat impersonal entity, and very much of the nature of “received knowing” (Johns, 2004, p.10), defined and judged by others. Overall, they identified and discussed practice in naive terms, reinforcing the discourse of a caring rather than educational role, and lacking the unique body of knowledge often associated with a recognised profession (Eraut, 1994).

This raises a number of questions. Is undergraduates’ concept of good practice a personal one, developed from personal values and beliefs, and shaped by their knowledge and understanding of children’s development and learning needs? Is it a concept defined and shaped by external regulatory frameworks? Or is it passed on and adopted without question from senior and experienced staff within the workplace? How is undergraduates’ ability to apply theories of development and learning to their own practice affected by their subordinate position in the workplace as novices, support workers or ‘guests’ on placement?

Through exploration of these questions, professional educators will be better able to support undergraduates in a personal critical evaluation of their values and the regulatory frameworks within which they work, empowering them in their reflections and offering them a voice in their professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Historically the need for a professionally qualified early years workforce has only recently been acknowledged by government, despite calls from by pioneers such as MacMillan, Montessori, Dewey and Froebel for a knowledgeable workforce to support the healthy development of children, and their progression as competent learners. This has now been addressed by the development of foundation degrees (FdAs) in children's learning and development, offering qualification to Level 5, which can then be topped up to Level 6, full BA Hons and supplemented with work-based learning and assessment to meet the standards of leadership and reflection for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS).

Such undergraduate provision includes a deeper exploration of the theories underpinning children's learning and development and their application to practice, and the development of leadership and management skills. It acknowledges a recognised need for reflective lead practitioners who are able to identify the key elements of good practice in their own and others' work, to be able to share these with their colleagues (CWDC, 2008). It is intended either for practitioners already in employment with qualifications at the equivalent of NVQ Level 3, or full-time undergraduates who learn to apply theory to practice through substantial work placement. It is anticipated that all students will develop their knowledge of leadership, management and interpersonal skills and reflective practice whilst undertaking FdA and BA Hons degrees in preparation for post-graduate assessment for EYPS. Most recently this has been further supported by government proposals to develop graduate level qualifications for practitioners to become Early Years Teachers (DfE, 2013).

However, when asked to reflect on specific aspects of their practice many of my undergraduates demonstrate a reluctance to do so or report that they do not know how to do so. They all have experience of working within the early years sector, in schools and private day-care/pre-school settings, either through substantial work placement (480 hours over 2 years) or paid employment, planning and evaluating learning activities against appropriate curricula frameworks, conducting observations, and identifying children's individual learning needs. Their hesitation and uncertainty about reflection suggests that as yet these students have not adopted the ontological stance required to support reflection – that it is up to the individual to decide what appropriate practice is and measure themselves against it.

Clearly if the early years sector is to employ senior staff with the skills to lead and change practice this needs to be addressed. Two problems have been identified through discussion with students. The processes of reflection are either unpractised or unknown to both full-time and part-time students. In addition to this, they are uncertain as to what are the appropriate

or valid frameworks within which they should be judging their practice; in other words they appear to lack a clearly articulated view of what good practice is. Both these issues point to a third problem, which is that these undergraduates do not understand what the purpose of reflection is and what it can be expected to achieve. This paper explores how students are using reflection, to determine what they understand the process to be. It also investigates how students are developing their own concepts and criteria for good practice in early years settings, and how they are using these to evaluate and guide their professional development.

REFLECTION AS A PROCESS

Reflection is a process that requires practitioners to accept the ontological premise that they, just as much as any other individual or body involved in their professional sector, can create knowledge and 'truth' about what practice should be, and it requires them to accept that reflection does not always clarify uncertainty but may simply add another possible dimension to understanding the outcome or impact of practice. It allows the practitioner to analyse their practice for its effectiveness and, significantly for practitioners working to support the lives of young children and their families, for the values it represents (Johns, 2004), offering a means of using practice to learn from constantly.

By paying attention to their practice this moves the practitioner towards an appreciation of their own values and how these impact on others (Mezirow, 1981, cited in Johns, 2004), and to the development of their own 'voice' (Belenky et al, 1986,) in determining what good practice means for them. The novice practitioner starts from a position of silence, only able to do as instructed, and accepting the values and assumptions already fostered in their workplace. Over time, by considering their own experience, and the validity of the regulatory frameworks they are required to follow, practitioners may come to question many of the assumptions made about how children's care and learning should be delivered, and to consider the wider implications of policy initiatives and legislation.

Issitt (2003) argues that reflective practice "is not neutral and value free, but affected by personal, political and professional factors that impact on practitioners" (Issitt, 2003, p.173), so practitioners will need to consider not just what they do and how it impacts on the children they work with, but also why they feel it is appropriate or effective and what they should be doing if it is not, in order to develop the more agentic voice of constructed knowing (Belenky, et al, 1986). Ultimately the practitioner will construct knowledge based on their own experiences as well the opinions and instructions of more authoritative figures, and judge their actions and values not just in terms of outcomes but also the impact they have on

others, echoing what Manning-Morton (2006) calls “a reflexive interpretation” of the relationships they develop, focusing on the impact of their practice in terms of relationships with children, parents/carers and within the multi-agency agenda of early years working today.

For reflection to be such an empowering process the practitioner needs the confidence and self-awareness to question, moving from the victimic stance of simply accepting and following, to a more agentic position (Johns, 2004), accepting their own experience as a valid learning tool. In doing so they need to come to terms with the knowledge that reflection on their practice is not a superficial case of deciding if practice is technically correct, but also involves the acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity when evaluating practice and learning from experience (Issitt, 2003). Questions about practice may not lead to absolute answers that will guide technical performance infallibly in future but rather raises awareness of issues and uncertainties that could arise again, but which the practitioner may be better able to consider, drawing on previous experience.

TEACHING REFLECTION TO EARLY YEARS UNDERGRADUATES

In introducing students on the FdA Early Years to the concept of reflection, it seemed most important that they should understand how reflective self-evaluation could be framed. Accordingly, across two modules of study at Levels 4 and 5, students were introduced to a range of models of reflection, encouraged to explore how these could be applied to their own professional experience, and to practice reflective self-evaluation through writing reflective accounts of work experience. Both groups of students (full and part-time) were required to reflect on how and why they applied a growing understanding of early years theory, policy and regulation to their practice, with full-time students using their supervised placement experience as a learning source and part-time students (all practitioners working in early years settings) drawing on their more autonomous working life.

Throughout this teaching, students were encouraged to critically evaluate different approaches to reflection and to experiment with them to see which suited them best as individuals, and reflection was never presented as a process that would deliver ‘right’ answers about best practice. However, assessment of reflective portfolios at Level 4 indicated that whilst the students were becoming technically competent in applying models of reflection to events in the workplace, reflection had become what Issitt (2003, p.181) describes as “a pragmatic activity focussing on the technical competence of the individual”, rather than the empowering tool for critical thinking it was intended to be, so that reflecting on their further professional development at Level 5 proved challenging, and explaining their

role as early years practitioners beyond the implementation of early years regulatory frameworks and curriculum was difficult. It was this apparent lack of understanding I wished to explore further, to understand what it was we needed to teach for reflection to be embedded in the professional development of the early years practitioner.

REFLECTION AND THE PRACTITIONER'S ROLE

For reflection to offer effective professional development to the practitioner it must be done within the context of a clear understanding of personal values and the skills and knowledge required for competent practice. Consideration should therefore be given to precisely what the professional role of the early years practitioner is. Professionalism implies expertise, knowledge unique to one set of workers rather than shared by many and which can be discussed with confidence (Eraut, 1994), suggesting a specific discourse, and a cultural and social capital associated with the practitioner role (Webb et al, 2002). Early years practice comes before compulsory education, and is based on outcomes for children which encompass health, well-being and safety as well as developmental and educational progress (DfES, 2004) so it may be difficult to identify the unique knowledge base for this developing profession. For many within the sector it is easier to say what they are not (not teachers, not Health Visitors, not Social Workers) than it is to define their own role.

Early years practice falls within pre-school, non-compulsory provision, reducing its apparent social status and economic capital, as it focuses on the least competent, least knowledgeable members of society. Manning-Morton (2006) argues that good practice should be understood in terms of "the day-to-day detail of practitioners' relationships with children, parents and colleagues" (Manning-Morton, 2006, p.42), acknowledging that whilst knowledge is vital if practitioners are to be effective, it should not be privileged over an understanding of the practitioner's impact on and their relationships with the people around them, and how these can influence their own feelings and interactions. Berthelsen and Brownlee (2007) similarly argue for the importance of practitioners developing and being aware of affective connections with the children they work with, as well as supporting learning and development.

Early years practitioners have been identified as coming to professional education with a wide range of naive beliefs, which show little or no evidence of any theoretical basis (Brownlee et al, 2000). Professional development then becomes a process of providing theoretical knowledge to underpin these beliefs, and should include teaching an approach to reflection that demonstrates how knowledge and belief may be brought together so that the one may validate the other. The learner should come to evaluate naive beliefs against the

theoretical knowledge, to reach their own conclusions as to what constitutes good and effective practice. Later work (Berthelsen and Brownlee, 2007) recognised that through reflection, practitioners were reporting more sophisticated beliefs, as the result of reflection on experience rather than simplistic acceptance of fact – subjective rather than simply received knowing (Belenky et al, 1986).

Osgood (2006) argues that reflection offers a means of asserting personal agency in defining good practice and the professional role of the practitioner, rather than acquiescing to the authority of an external regulating body, and she cautions against the use of reflection simply to identify a series of competencies and skills that make up to role of the early years practitioner. Reflection should be used by the individual practitioner to refine their own views and values regarding good practice, rather than becoming a process of acknowledging technical competence in the skills of practice. By taking a more agentic stance in evaluating their own practice, practitioners will be empowered to articulate their own definitions of good practice. This in turn will lead them to identify the body of knowledge they wish to take professional ownership of, whether it be theories of development, curriculum and pedagogy, a belief in the importance of play in young children's early lives, or an understanding of the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

RESEARCH AIMS

It was important to explore how these students were using reflection beyond the purposes of degree-level assessment, and if they viewed their performance in the workplace and their own professional experience as of suitable quality and importance to use as learning tools. Reflection will never become an empowering process for them until they accept that what they bring to the process has worth. By exploring how much these students had come to accept the ontological assumptions needed for reflection to be a personal, self-led process, valuing the learning potential of personal experience, would indicate how professional education could best be developed to support this process. I also wanted to see how much of their judgements of their own practice came from their own values or from the external authority of regulating frameworks or managerial supervision.

Finally it was important to explore how these students framed and conceptualised good practice, what sources they drew on to describe this and with what sense of agency and confidence they articulated it. I hoped to identify personal views and values that underpinned their ways of working, and to see how these were used to inform self-evaluation. Whilst this would be a very small study it would enable me to explore data gathering and analysis approaches to identify what would take me, as an external listener, closest to the personal

voice of the practitioner and encourage them to say what they felt and believed, rather than what they might feel obliged to articulate to a tutor.

METHODOLOGY

Since reflection itself is based on the ontological premise that knowledge is created and constructed by the individual, arising from their experiences and relationships with others, it is only appropriate that it should be investigated from the same standpoint. This investigation therefore takes the ethnographic approach framed by Spradley (1979), using semi-structured interviews enabling participants to make their own sense of their actions within the social world of the early years setting, and accepting their position as the possessor and constructor of knowledge, with the authority to define their social or professional world. The use of semi-structured interviewing also offered the opportunity for participants to express their ideas freely, and the interaction they might need to shape and focus their ideas.

It was vital in this investigation that participants recognised that they had the authority to reject any framing of their concepts that I offered and to propose their own. To achieve this, I have also adopted in my data analysis the Listening Guide approach in order to “keep respondents’ voices and perspectives alive” (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.119). This not only requires careful listening to how informants respond as well as to what they actually say, but also a reflexive stance on the part of the researcher. Research aims, and the themes pursued in my interviewing are not chosen at random, but say as much about my concepts of good practice and professional identity and autonomy as they do about my informants’. It was important therefore that any analysis reflected their ideas and opinions per se rather than being judged simply as a comparison against my own expectations.

Sampling

The participants in this investigation are seven students who have successfully completed their Foundation degree (FdA) in Early Years, two from the part-time course who are employed in the early years sector, and five from the full time course who have completed substantial work placement in order to develop their professional practice. Their selection was based on previous knowledge of these individuals as they had previously demonstrated through assignments and placement reports a thoughtful approach to their practice and some competence in the rudimentary skills of reflection. They had also demonstrated, through class participation, a willingness to discuss and critique their own practice. Each was offered the opportunity to decline at the start of the study or to withdraw their data at any point up to data interpretation.

Data Analysis

Initial data analysis was conducted by identifying common themes within all seven interviews, specifically focussing on whether or not informants followed specific processes to judge their practice and whether or not they included or relied on any external sources. This was in part to see how they made use of any reflective practices they had been taught but also to see if the policy and legislative frameworks for their practice were at all helpful in defining their professional role. My overall interest was to determine if their concepts of good practice in working with young children were based on intuitive, interpersonal skills and values or if good practice was seen as something defined and judged by external authorities, potentially undermining the right of the individual to find and express their own professional voice.

Further data analysis using the Listening Guide then followed, in the form of two 'readings' of each interview, firstly for the plot or narrative of what was being told, and secondly to locate the voice of "I". This first reading would help to clarify the thematic analysis as it should produce a narrative for each interview to consider alongside the themes identified. A close match would confirm that themes had been identified that related closely to the experiences and concepts of the informants rather than which simply matched my own conceptualisation of good practice in early years. In reading for the voice of the informant the researcher's attention is drawn more to individuality and difference between informants (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998), a key factor when considering personal values and concepts. Shifting use of pronouns such as "I", "we", "they" and "you" might identify how personally these concepts were developed and with what confidence they were made explicit, indicating a level of agency.

By combining these approaches I hoped to address issues of reflexivity in the data analysis, acknowledging where my own expectations were either being matched or confounded by informants' responses, and trying to guard against thematic analysis that confirmed or refuted only my personal views.

FINDINGS

Thematic Analysis and Reading for Plot

Both thematic analysis and the Reading for Plot of all seven interviews indicated that these early years practitioners saw the children they work with as being at the heart of good practice. They typically defined good practice as being child-centred and child-led, and/or measured in terms of outcomes for the child, either in terms of emotional well-being or

progression in their learning. Five of the seven considered the outcomes for the children they work with when reflecting on their own professional practice. Similar findings have been noted by Berthelsen and Brownlee (2007) and this also highlights Manning-Morton's (2006) concern that educational practice and the advancement of children's learning may be more valued than interpersonal, caring skills.

Others offered some insight into how they would judge practice in colleagues and thus how they might expect to be judged themselves, again placing the child at the centre of the process:

“a lot of it depends on how a child reacts to them” (Participant 3)

Participant 1 claimed that emotional connection underpinned good practice, as she says, “I'd be looking for ... first of all the rapport they've got with the child”. These two participants are starting to express their understanding of the need to promote emotional well-being if children are to be successful learners, but such expressions are naively articulated. Good practice was described as a mix of practical and interpersonal skills blended with knowledge and intuition, and underpinned by a personal commitment to the work and a caring disposition towards young children:

“I think a good knowledge of child development is quite important ...I think a good set of empathy skills is important so you can connect with the child and get to know them quite well” (Participant 3)

Participant 1 concurred with this, saying, “the knowledge itself is not enough”, which demonstrates some value for the interpersonal skills on which Manning-Morton (2006) places a premium, and again reinforces the discourse of care rather than education associated with early years practice.

Participant 7 offered a very striking comment on the fact that many practitioners feel it is important to have direct, personal commitment to the early years profession:

“we didn't join nursery nursing because of a) the pay or b) because dog grooming was full”.

None of these practitioners however linked such personal commitment to the emotional needs of the child or mentioned it again when discussing the ways in which they reflected on

their own practice, reflecting previous findings (Brownlee et al, 2000) that practitioners' discourse is fundamentally naive and unsophisticated.

These were only two occasions when participants acknowledged that practice may be influenced by its social context, suggesting that there may be a situated element to good practice based on the relationships unique to the staff team and/or the children and their families within a given early years setting, rather than some kind of absolute, transferrable good practice or personal approach that transcends context. Belenky et al (1986) argue that it is relationships within the work or learning community that can support the novice practitioner in making sense of their social experience and learning from it. Similarly Fook and Gardner (2007) consider the social relationships within the workplace to be a key factor in supporting individuals to make sense of their practice through reflection. However the relationships alluded in these interviews suggest that these undergraduates look to those with managerial roles and seniority for confirmation of the quality of their own practice, as authoritarian or powerful figures with some means of control over them or greater understanding of regulatory frameworks, rather than as colleagues with whom they can discuss the values underpinning the frameworks they work within.

This is to some extent borne out as five out of the seven participants suggest that good practice is an abstract entity, shaped or determined by regulatory requirements, practice guidance or curriculum frameworks:

“They're [The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce (DfES, 2008), The Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2007), Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004)] all methods that would ensure good practice in your setting”
(Participant 2)

It should be noted though that these are regulatory, practice-based frameworks rather than underpinning academic, research-based knowledge and theory. Reflection is being perceived as a tool to find 'right' ways of practising, rather than to explore best and most appropriate practice based on personal values, as Issitt (2003) fears can be the case. Reflection has become a self-regulatory tool for these practitioners to decide if they are meeting someone else's standards rather than to explore how they are pursuing their own values and ideals.

All but one participant reported using reflection and specific reflective models to evaluate their practice, many making explicit reference to the use of Gibbs' model (Gibbs, 1988):

“I use the first one we did – is it Gibbs? ...I find them easier ‘cos in the question you can answer yes” (Participant 4)

Participant 1 however preferred a different model if she used one at all, but acknowledged that in any case she was by nature a reflective person:

“I’m the sort of person that judges myself quite a lot and I think through reflection it’s helped me both in looking at what I could have done better but also what I have done well” (Participant 1).

However it could be the case that these informants are simply competent technicians when it comes to applying a model or structure to their thinking, as evidenced by their struggle to use reflection to guide their own professional development. Fook and Gardner (2007) argue that reflection should support students in closing the gap between theory and practice but if reflection remains a superficial exercise in intuitively assessing practice and its outcomes without deeper consideration of underpinning theory or values it will not lead to any further understanding of what constitutes good practice.

In reading for the plot, the language used by some of the informants as they considered notions of good practice became more noticeable, as did the issues they raise concerning personal constructs of good practice. Participant 1’s narrative used the term ‘child’ or ‘children’ almost to the total exclusion of the word ‘practitioner’. Clearly good practice for her starts and ends with the service user not the service provider, and stands or falls on the quality of the relationship between the two, judged from the perspective of the child. This practitioner is beginning to articulate an awareness of herself as a reflexive practitioner (Manning-Morton 2006). However her articulation of these interpersonal skills and emotional connection with the child remains naive and unsophisticated, with no support from underpinning theory. Her reflections have led her to understand that relationships with children lie at the heart of good practice but as yet she is unable to say why. Participant 3, who relied on her placement supervisors for evaluations of her practice, used the word ‘correctly’ throughout her explanation of how she evaluated her practice. Clearly she believes that there are right ways to do things in early years practice but this right way was never made explicit, nor did she give any indication where the criteria for such a judgement could be found.

Overall when considering this reading the most striking feature from all these interviews was the sense that good practice was what these practitioners wished to achieve but that none of them felt they did on a regular basis. Reflection was a tool that would help them to improve their practice but very much in the way that Osgood (2006) cautions against – reflection against a set of prescriptive professional competences, drawn from current regulatory frameworks, that instead of promoting individual professional judgement, imposes control from external authority figures through means of inspections and regulations.

Reading for the Voice of “I”

Although this reading inevitably yielded limited data due to the sample size, nonetheless how practitioners talked about themselves and their practice was interesting. When asked to consider their own practice, participants were happy to use the first person, and to own their opinions and experiences. There was much use across all seven interviews of phrases such as “I think”, “I feel” and “I know” and a willingness to engage with me in drawing out personal opinion regarding good practice or how it might be judged.

However, when describing what good practice might look like within the setting, and judging this practice, there was a tendency for these informants to use “they” and “you” in their statements:

“they need to know all the theories ... they need to know all about the individual child”
(Participant 2)

Personal practice then is different from good practice, which seemed to be viewed as an abstract entity, rather than something they owned or demonstrated. Participant 7 gives a clear demonstration of this as her description of good practice includes:

“it’s the whole organisation’s good practice ... you build up the picture of how you should be working”

When asked to give an example she cites “we’ve got good planning”, and goes on to include in her definition external agencies such as OfSTED and the local authority and involvements from a range of service users and staff. Good practice for this informant is not a personal construct at all.

As previously noted, my participants all turned to external authorities for judgement of their practice, and this was reflected in their use of personal pronouns. Most notably, Participant 1

defined good practice so exclusively in terms of interpersonal relationships with children and the meeting of their individual needs that her narrative was framed almost solely in terms of “I”. Her use of “you” emerged when she discussed external frameworks (DCSF, 2007; DfES, 2008), which she did not appear to think sat well with her much personalised view of what good practice is. However, in attempting to distance her understanding of good practice from regulatory authorities, she still uses an external agent – this time the child – as the ultimate arbiter of the quality of her practice.

However Participant 2, no matter how much the questions focussed on her own practice and experience, gave her answers almost entirely from the point of view of “they” or “you”, even when discussion her own evaluation and reflection on her practice, for example:

MD: “How do *you* decide about *your* practice?”

Participant 2: “you’d probably ask other people in your setting”

It would appear then that good practice and professional practice may be seen to be different things, the former an abstract entity or goal to be aspired to and defined by external authorities, and the latter a more personal description of what an individual does, but which must still be judged by others. Reflection is a process used to satisfy oneself that rules or orthodox practice are being followed but not to consider what good practice could or should be.

CONCLUSIONS

Concepts of Good Practice

Good practice in early years settings, as defined by these practitioners when discussing their own practice, reflects a continuing focus on the discourse of care rather than learning but there is a striking naivety in the language used by these informants. Whilst they articulate the concepts of good practice accounted as important by Manning-Morton (2006) and Berthelsen et al (2007), they do so using unsophisticated language that preserves the discourse of care at an intuitive level. Children and their emotional and social needs appear to lie at the heart of good practice but despite their undergraduate qualifications, none of these participants made reference to developmental, psychological or educational theories to support their ideas.

However, whilst these practitioners are confident in their discourse of care, they require external validation of their skills to educate. They acknowledge that their work includes a

strong element of supporting learning and development, i.e. an educational role based on theories of development, curriculum and pedagogy. However, good practice in supporting learning is discussed almost as an abstract entity rather than as something they feel they own and exemplify, something they must be judged by others to perform rather than something whose definition they personally contribute to. It is defined within the context of curriculum frameworks and inspection requirements, and the reactions of children and colleagues, rather than through an examination of personal values. Whilst the regulatory frameworks have been written in terms to try and avoid such interpretation – guidance, suggestions, good practice rather than rules and requirements – practitioners themselves have used them to try to understand at superficial level what their role is. What these practitioners need is professional education that encourages an examination of how their personal values and these external frameworks match up or contradict each other, and which fosters the ability to risk asking personal questions about beliefs and values.

The Voice of the Practitioner

None of the participants in this study could truly be described as silent in their responses, as they all show a readiness to reflect on their own practice and learn from it. Received knowing, recognising themselves as engaged in the learning process best describes these practitioners, as they turn to colleagues and tutors for judgement and confirmation of good practice, and but lack the confidence to judge themselves. They are as Belenky et al (1986) describe – recipients of knowledge rather than generators, relying on the wisdom of authorities.

There is evidence of an emerging agency in all these practitioners, as they demonstrate elements of subjective knowing and even personal and constructed knowing in their responses. Belenky et al (1986) note that with this kind of knowing comes a change in self awareness and the novice practitioner may now come to realise they have knowledge and understanding to contribute to the community of practice, based on their own experience. Such a change in perception, such a contribution requires confidence on the part of the learner and may not be an easy transition to make. Communities of practice need to be built to support such exploration that treat the experienced and inexperienced as having equal contributions to offer and ensure that the visiting placement student does not remain at the periphery, with limited participation and therefore limited agency in this process.

The Role of the HEI in supporting Reflection and the Development of Professional Identity

It is not the role of the HEI to tell practitioners what good practice is. Early years practitioners must develop the confidence and agency to decide this for themselves as individuals and as a professional sector, or else they remain competent technicians following processes and practices determined and limited by others. However, by teaching reflection as a process that encourages the examination of personal values and beliefs, and the impact of practice on others, practitioners will develop the reflexive approach Manning-Morton (2006) argues is essential for early years practice to be effective in supporting children's holistic development.

As yet these early years undergraduate practitioners do not have the self-awareness to be able to articulate their professional values or the confidence to challenge current orthodoxy in early years learning outcomes or regulatory frameworks. Greater experience within the workplace, greater participation in communities of practice and learning will support this development, and empower novice practitioners with a sense of agency not currently evident in their accounts of good practice. Further development of work placement links with employers and a shared understanding of what reflection should achieve will support this.

For reflection to play a key part in articulating professional identity, students must be encouraged to accept the ontological view that the social world of work, and professional identity, is created through the interactions and negotiated shared meanings of all its participants, including themselves as empowered agents rather than passive receivers of knowledge and judgement. Such constructed knowledge is based on the personal experiences and judgements of the individual, synthesising knowledge from a range of different sources including the personal.

The workplace community plays a key role in nurturing the skills of the novice (Belenky et al, 1986), and only through relationships with others can practice be explored and sense made of its outcomes (Fook and Gardner, 2007). Whilst this process begins with guidance from other more authoritative and mentoring figures ultimately, if reflection is to be empowering, practitioners should come to take responsibility for constructing their own knowledge, and forming their own professional identity, rather than accepting the rules of others. Procedural and constructed knowing (Belenky et al, 1986) represent the point at which underpinning theory and the teachings from undergraduate programmes may be used effectively to give the practitioner a concept of good practice that is not just a reiteration of policy and educational and developmental theory but one that is embedded in personal experience and personal values about the overall purpose of their role. These ways of knowing will afford

practitioners the agency they require to make their own definition of their professional role, and to set the tone for the discourse of the modern early years sector.

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