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Professional identity in children and young people's workforce

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Context

- 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.
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)
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.
Front Line Staff

- 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 focused 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’).
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.