0317

Power/Knowledge and the Profession: reclaiming practice-based evidence in early childhood

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Background

Understood as dialogic and democratic practice, education implies the transformation of the world. Paolo Freire, whose work inspires early childhood educators in many countries of this world, strongly believed that what makes education specifically human is its openness: its radicalness of an inconclusion that is perceived as such (1997).

Far from embracing this openness, predominant understandings and practices of education often operate out of a technoscientific (Turnbull, 2000) mindset, aiming at achieving predetermined outcomes and at serving taken-for-granted needs of society. In this frame of thinking, education and its institutions and professions are more concerned about transmission than about transformation of knowledge. Research, in these contexts, degenerates to a means of knowledge production-for-application. 'What works?' appears to be the only relevant research question - and the quest for evidence to direct practice to effectiveness is further driven by the agendas of funders and policy makers (Biesta 2007; Oliver & Conole 2003).

Research Questions

While powerful and highly influential, this narrow focused understanding of the relationship between research and professional practice in education and its possible purposes ignores the fundamental difference between 'practice' and 'technology'. It suggests there are straight routes from A to B and therefore maps can be provided for practitioners to follow. The paper questions this notion and introduces the concept of dialogic and democratic practices throughout the entire early childhood professional system (Moss&Urban 2010). From the point of view of a critical ecology of the profession (Urban&Dalli 2008), it is argued, research becomes a practice as well as practice becomes research: a shared activity of coming to an understanding, as hermeneutical philosophy would describe it.

The paper explores the challenges and possibilities that arise from this paradigm for the individual researcher/practitioner as well as for the power relations within the system that produces a professional body of knowledge which, in early childhood, necessarily relies largely on untested feasibilities (Freire).

Methods

The paper offers a theoretical framing of several international sets of case studies and documentations of early childhood professional practice in different socio-cultural contexts (e.g. Europe, West Africa, New Zealand).

Frame

Starting from a Freirian perspective on education as an inevitably political practice, the paper draws on Michel Foucault's analysis of the power/knowledge relationship as a constant, and potentially productive, struggle.

Research findings

Drawing on successful and empowering examples of early childhood practices, the paper builds a case for democratic, dialogic and open approaches to creating professional knowledge in early childhood and argues for the early childhood profession to re-claim practice-based evidence.