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Who am I? The emerging construct of professional identity in the early years sector

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Background

A decade of reform in the early years sector has developed a landscape of change for those working in settings and children's services in England. Central to this policy is raising the quality of provision through a highly qualified workforce. Ten years ago, findings in the Rumbold Report: Starting with Quality (DES, 1990) found inequalities of provision for three and four years olds in settings; recommending higher qualified staff working in the sector for higher quality of provision and service, subsequently sector related undergraduate and work-based foundation degrees were established. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project (Sylva et al, 2004) found children achieved better outcomes in settings led by higher qualified staff.

The Children's Workforce Strategy (CWDC) (2005) introduced significant workforce reform for the early years sector with a vision of creating and supporting a world-class workforce, increasingly competent and confident to make a difference to the lives of children and families they support, through the development of a graduate workforce. A graduate practitioner with a nationally recognised professional award; the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) is key to this reform, a 'change agent' to lead and improve practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage (CWDC, 2006) in daycare and children's centres, raising the quality of provision. Abbott and Rodger (1994) recognised the important role of government developing policy in the early years for quality provision, but highlight the quality of practitioners as educators, as important as government policy.

Research Questions

The word 'professional' in the title of the EYPS award, is a new and undefined concept within the early years sector, externally imposed by the government, but evolving and emerging from within the workforce. EYP's role involves leading learning, connecting leadership and professionalism, raising the status a traditionally female workforce (Kay, 2005). Working with children has been regarded as 'women's work' with low pay and status, associated with the nurturing and caring role of a mother. Experienced women practitioners accessing higher education and graduating with sector related degrees has empowered them to be confident reflective professional practitioners, raising the status of the workforce. Their personal and professional development has opened up employment opportunities; leadership and management roles, being in the forefront of implementing government policy (Hallet, 2008).

Professionalisation of the early years sector through the introduction of graduate awards, highlights questions to be answered either at national or local level. What constitutes professionalism? (Miller and Cable, 2008) and how are practitioners working in the early years sector developing a professional identity? Identity construction is situated in national and local contexts, individuals self-concept derives from the value and recognition of a socially defined group (Tajfel and Forgas 1981 in Osborn et al, 2003). This paper explores these questions through research undertaken with practitioners studying on undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Methods

Feminist qualitative research uses a variety of highly diversified, dynamic and challenging qualitative modes of data collection using combinations of experimental and text orientated (Olsen, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The use of a feminist approach to methodology was empathetic to the research sample of women practitioners, enabling women to tell their own stories, by creating a context in which they felt comfortable exploring their feelings and experiences (Elliott, 2006). The sample of

practitioners constructed and presented their own professional identity through a range of biographical reflective representations.

Qualitative data was collected through narrative methodology of qualitative interviews, visual and written representations (Elliott, 2006). Voluntary consent was gained from respondents, they were assured their views would be anonymised and the purpose of the research was explained prior to data collection.

Frame

The data was analysed using an interpretative approach in order to understand the respondents meanings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Plummer, 2001).

Meaning of this emerging construct of professional identity was co-constructed by the researcher and participants analysing emerging themes to gain a collective view (Yin, 2003). A thematic analysis of their views providing an insight into the emerging construct of professionalism in the early years sector, in relation to a theoretical framework of policy developments, workforce reform and a feminist paradigm.

Research findings

The development of professional identity within the early years sector is a new area of professional knowledge, externally proposed from the Children's Workforce Strategy (2005), emerging from practitioners working within the sector. This research gives an insight into the emerging construct of professional identity contributing to this new area of knowledge and understanding.