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McMahon, Samantha and Dyer, Mary A.

A narrative approach to professional identity

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A narrative approach to exploring professional identity in early years practitioners
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The diverse and complex nature of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector, including state, private and voluntary sector providers, stakeholders and types of provision, as well as the myriad range of qualifications held by the current workforce, and the impact of this on the development of a coherent professional identity and role for practitioners, has been noted in the UK (Osgood, 2006, Nutbrown, 2012, Chalke, 2013) and further afield in New Zealand and Australia (Dalli, 2008, Cooke et al, 2013). This may in part be addressed by the streamlining and rebranding of qualifications currently proposed by government (DfE, 2013). However, such repackaging by government bodies does not take into account what practitioners themselves consider their role to be, nor will it necessarily reflect the core values that drew them into the early years workforce in the first place.

Good practice and practitioner roles have been researched in some depth in terms of positive outcomes for children and parents (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, Sylva, 2004, DfES, 2005), but little has been said about how practitioners see themselves and how work-based learning supports the development of professional identity. Practitioners have been found to describe themselves in naive terms (Brownlee et al, 2000), and more comfortably oriented to a discourse of care rather than education (Berthelsen et al 2007). The privileging of an education-oriented discourse within early years practice has been identified which marginalises the affective element of early years practice considered by many to be a vital factor in supporting young children's learning and development (Cooke et al, 2013, Manning-Morton 2006, Isaacs, 1929) and which risks presenting the professional identity of the practitioner in neo-liberal, technicist terms (Chalke, 2013, Moss, 2006).

The development of reflective and critical thinking skills within the teaching of graduate level qualifications, and the recognition of individual experience in the ECEC sector as a professional development resource would afford practitioners personal agency in defining their practice, and the autonomy to develop their professional identity from a personal values base (Osgood, 2006, Moss, 2006). Such an activist approach to professionalisation adopts a self-constructivist stance, acknowledging the right of the individual to define themselves (Chalke, 2013). It would also give equal value to a professional identity which emphasised the educator role, and to one which promoted the support of children's well-being and emotional development as a key factor underpinning their early development and learning, calling into question the necessity and the inevitably of the care/education divide seen by practitioners and service users today in the ECEC sector (Cohen et al, 2004).

In taking such an individual and personal approach to the formation of professional identity, it is important then to hear the voice of the individual practitioner in describing what they consider themselves to be and what they value in their practice. Such exploration of personal concepts requires a methodological approach and data analysis that allows for the voice of the practitioner to be heard and interpreted honestly and accurately in answer to overall research questions:

- What does it mean to be an early years practitioner?
- What is good early years practice?
- What is the practitioner's experience of professionalisation?

Our work, comprising two separate explorations of early years practitioners' professional identities, takes a narrative approach to data gathering and analysis, using semi-structured interviews that encourage the use of stories from the workplace with graduate-level practitioners in England, to explore the lived experience of these practitioners, accepting the proposition that narratives offer "windows on inner lives rather than social worlds" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009, p.7). The experiences of the individual practitioner, the stories they chose to tell about their working lives, will offer insight into what they consider to be the important and salient points about their roles, the ways in which they identify themselves (Lieblich et al, 1998). Whilst data generated by taking a narrative approach centre on the individual, they also offer insight into practitioners' social worlds, their interactions and relationships with others, in a sector concerned now more than ever with multi-agency working. Narrative offers the opportunity to make private experience public (Chase, 2008) and encourages the researcher to listen to the account of the individual per se, rather than to dissect data to arrive at generalised themes and similarities across a group. It is this very personal, private construction of self we are trying to uncover in exploring the individual professional identities of graduate practitioners, in answer to the question 'who do *they* think *themselves* to be', not 'how well do they fit competence-based criteria prescribed by external authorities'. This then may inform the teaching of reflection and critical thinking and support for work-based learning in graduate-level professional education.

Analysis has been undertaken on data gathered to date by either using the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998), developed to support researchers in "keeping respondents' voices and perspectives alive", or the development of monologues from interview data, to convey individual stories in their own words (Lewis 1963). In attempting to be faithful to our participants in our presentation and interpretation of their experiences in portraying professional identity, we are aware that validity and rigour need to be maintained within our research. Our approaches have been selected to ensure the former does not come at the cost of the latter. The validity of our

findings are based on the transparency demonstrated in our presentation and analysis (Polkinghorne, 2007), and the informality of using a story-based approach to generate richer, more personal and honest accounts of experience than might be gained within a more formal interview schedule (Chase, 2008). The independent versions of the same phenomena '*provide a built in check upon the reliability and validity of much of the data and thereby partially offset the subjectivity'* (Lewis 1963 pxxiii).

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A narrative approach to exploring professional identity in early years practitioners

Samantha McMahon

Mary Dyer

Purpose of narrative

- Understanding comes from lots of different places– (Michael Rosen BBC R4 2/4/2014)
- Sumsion and Goodfellow (2012)– narratives, essentially tell us what happened and why is what happened worth telling.

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The use of narrative

- Lieblich et al (1998, p.7):
  - narratives provide us with access to people's identity and personality.

- Polkinghorne (2007) - validity for narrative inquiry is a question of how well-argued interpretations are, rather than a judgement on their 'correctness'. Narrative data analysis is not a question of presenting a privileged and sole interpretation of what has been shared but a strong and well-argued, persuasive understanding.

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Data handling

- Researcher seeks to answer the following questions in their handling and analysis. (Sumsion and Goodfellow 2012)
- Abstract-what is the story about-participants experience of becoming an EYP (professionalization)
- Orientation-who, when, where? (Karen, Debbie, Lauren and Emma)
- Complicating action-then what happened? Monologues
- Result/resolution-what finally happened? Monologues
- Evaluation-so what? Why is it worth telling?

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analysis

- Monologues inspired by Bennett and Lewis.
- Participants voice and identity shine, monologues but in relation to others.
- For the participants.
- Their story, my story, our story? Illuminates the details.
- However: More to the data–so what?

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Bolman and Deal

- however because multiframe thinking is a way of understanding improvement strategies, and the ways in which the implementation process distorts policymakers intentions (Bolman and Deal 2013) it can be applied to the data to enhance understanding of professionalization.

- Four Frames-structural, human resource, political and symbolic

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Where the data has taken me
'researcher do your job' Barr (2012)
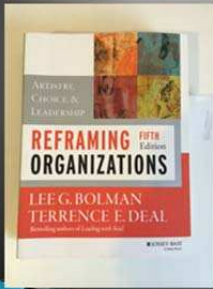
- Unexpected turn–organisational and structural issues to the fore.
- Bolman and Deal (2008, 2013) are concerned with how 'multiframe' (p18) thinking applies to organizations;

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Listening Guide (VCRM)

- Reading 1 for the plot – to confirm initial analysis/offer control for reflexivity
- Reading 2 for the voice of I – to locate the voice of the practitioner
- Reading 3 for relationships
- Reading 4 to place people within cultural contexts and social structures

(Mauthner and Doucet ,1998)

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Narratives on practice

- Consider why these incidents were chosen:

  - What do they focus on
  - How are they described
  - How are they judged
  - What makes them important/memorable to the practitioner

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Sharing data, your thoughts

- Comments and questions please

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