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Problematising Education and Social Policy: Perceptions of Poverty and Professional Development in Early Years Education in England

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Introduction

Within countries in the European Union child poverty is a social problem that is considered by educationalists and policymakers. In England, the first child poverty strategy was released in 2011. The background to this policy initiative appears to link to a neoliberal wish to include as many individuals as possible within the methodologically mercurial term 'social capital' (Bagley and Ackerley 2006). Social capital can be summarized as being 'the institutions and relationships of a thriving civil society' (Gerwirtz, Dickson, Power, Halpin, and Whitty 2005, 654). Drawing on qualitative interviews with 10 early years practitioners (working with children aged from birth to eight years) in the poorest region of England, my current research has explored the perceptions of these practitioners about their professional development. There are strategies in place to aid these educationalists as professionals within what has been referred to in England as 'the children's workforce'. But the research participants have described these strategies in ways that are not always complimentary. The consequence appears to be an ineffectual attempt to improve awareness of the causes and educational consequences of child poverty (Simpson 2013). The research explores the challenges that are present in establishing effective professional development for educationalists if we are to provide policies that address 'regimes of inequality'. This challenge may be equated to the difficulties faced by 'disparate communities' during the early days of the establishment of the road infrastructure, 'where local knowledge passed by word of mouth was needed to navigate around the country' (Leask and Younie 2013, 275). The research suggests that we need to

construct a 'new super highway' in this area based on teaching and research in order to inform policy in this area.

Problematising Professional Development in Early Years in England

In my research on perceptions of professional development by educators in early years in England, I have applied a theoretical framework that is based on an espistemological interpretation of theories of literacy as social practice. This epistemology has been generated into literacy studies by (Barton 1994; and Gee 1996 cited in Tummons, 2014, 35). The subsequent theoretical approach enables researchers to critically analyse text-based literacy artefacts. The professional development needs of early years educators in England have been considered in view of this theoretical background to the research. The formal examples of professional development among the research participants can be visualised as a 'literacy artefact'. These formal examples of professional development are experienced and made manifest within 'literary events'- activities 'where literacy has a role' (Tummons, 2014, 35). Literacy events are generated by 'literary practices' that are essentially 'ways that people use language in all sorts of social contexts' (Tummons, 2015, 36). 'Literacy events' are relatively easy to observe, but 'literacy practices' are not because 'they involve how people feel about, or the extent to which they value the literacy in question' (Barton, 1994, 7 cited in Tummons, 2014, 36). This is why Barton (1994) argues that literacy can be interpreted as being a set of social practices. The epistemological relevance for this research context rests in the possibility of different literacies and different literacy practices becoming manifest within the experiences of professional development by the research population. Tummons notes the presence of 'academic literacies' and 'workplace literacies' (2014, 36). Although the domains are not discrete as movement is possible across domains, the consequences result in complex interpretations of literacy artefacts. This theoretical model is considered by the researcher to be an ideal theoretical framework to consider the experiences of professional development of

early years educators in England. The nature of professional development (or 'artefact') is made manifest within CPD (continuing professional development) as an 'event.' It is the 'practice' of professional development that becomes critical to the success of the educators. The research links to Aileen Kennedy's (2005) article that outlines nine key models of CPD. Kennedy's (2005) article provides a fascinating analysis of the capacity of 'the nine models' to support CPD. The success of the article appears to be based on its reflection on the circumstances that enable the models to be adopted, the forms of knowledge that can result from the models, alongside reflecting on the power relationships that are inherent within these paradigms of CPD. This research has used Kennedy's (2005) work as a background to exploring the perceptions of CPD from 10 English early years workers in 2015. The qualitative research findings outline uncertainty over the nature and purpose of CPD in this educational context. The theoretical content of the research problematises the CPD of early years workers in England. The challenge of transforming CPD from an 'artefact' to an 'event' to a form of innovative 'practice' is revealed.

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