

The Early Years Network: a case study in continuing professional development

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Abstract:

This paper describes the organisation of an Early Childhood Network as a forum to support practitioners' investigation and documentation of practice to build towards a postgraduate qualification. Empirical data is presented from participants' reflective journals and interviews and the themes emerging from this explored. The need for initiatives to provide professional development for all Early Years Practitioners commensurate with that of teachers within mainstream schooling is asserted. Although this discussion focuses on the UK, the authors believe that the issues raised may be usefully considered by Early Childhood practitioners and those engaged in professional development in other cultures and contexts.

Introduction

This paper describes the organisation of an Early Childhood Network and participants' use of action research and portfolio building to analyse, reflect on and share practice. It explores how this forum was created as a way to support practitioners in examining their own assumptions and values, to develop their practice and to document this process as reflective practitioners (Bolton, 2005) in order to build towards a postgraduate qualification. The EPPE project (Sylva et al, 2004) has been instrumental in driving recognition that the biggest factor determining the quality of childcare is the workforce; however literature and research on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) continues to be focussed primarily on a school context. The crucial role of Early Years practitioners needs to be included in this debate.

The significance of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector has frequently been unrecognised due to a hierarchy of values which places the learning and development of older students above that of three and four year olds. Although attitudes are beginning to change, this climate is still one in which the mutual support of fellow practitioners has a key role to play in validating beliefs and practices, reinforcing underlying philosophy and reaffirming the principles which underpin the early childhood tradition (Bruce, 2005).

In recent years ECEC has begun to rise on the UK public agenda and there have been moves to integrate welfare and education approaches through the reorganisation of structures (Pugh, 2006) and the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (DfES, 2007). Although the legacy of a market driven approach to child care within which *quantity* of provision was the prime focus is still apparent, the establishment of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) with a remit to upskill the children's workforce demonstrates a commitment to enhancement of quality. The government's pledge to ensure a graduate in every setting by the year 2010, associated with recognition of the status of Early Years Professionals, is a welcome move. Nonetheless the CPD strategy within education, driven by a standards agenda and a commitment to school improvement, could be seen as another example of the division between education and early years care. Early Years is often viewed as not quite the same as 'proper' education. This paper explores how an Early Years Network can redress this imbalance by ensuring that practitioners in the sector who are not classroom teachers have the same range of opportunities to extend their professional knowledge and understanding.

Background context

The initial motivation for setting up the network arose as a result of the publication of *Learning and Teaching; A Strategy for Professional Development* (DfES, 2001) which laid out the government agenda for continuing professional development for teachers. A budget of £92m

was identified with the intention that 700,000 teachers would benefit from this initiative. Within the University of Worcester, the Centre for Early Childhood was only one of the interest groups involved in setting up projects leading to postgraduate qualifications for practising teachers.

However, as a multidisciplinary field, it is never easy to locate Early Childhood, either as a subject within higher education institutions or indeed in terms of local authority governance (Neuman, 2005). Government funding for CPD was only available for recognised teachers and thus many Early Years practitioners from a wide range of different settings were not eligible. Nonetheless, three free modules available through this government initiative were an attraction that stimulated the initial development of the network.

Organisation of the network

The Early Years Network was set up to draw all those interested in early learners, regardless of the setting where they are based. The intention was to develop a learning community rather than follow a traditional model of transmission learning. It soon became evident that the usual pattern of post graduate provision would not be appropriate for our participants. Conditions of work differ widely amongst the wide variety of Early Years settings and there were a number of keen applicants who were certain that they could not attend weekly taught sessions. Thus a mixture of pedagogical belief and pragmatism informed planning from the beginning.

Network meetings take place on a regular monthly basis and include both planned 'input' and an opportunity to discuss students' own work. Participants come from a wide range of different backgrounds and include nursery, reception and year 1 teachers, a playgroup leader, Children's Centre leader and staff, lecturers from both Higher and Further Education, Local Authority Early Years Advisors, private nursery managers and a child nutritionist, therefore input needs to be flexible and adaptable to everyone's circumstances. A rolling programme of modules enables students to gain credit towards a Masters programme from whichever point they join the network. This ensures continuity within the group and encourages the sharing of good practice. Monthly meetings develop ideas about a variety of topics - for instance past meetings have considered Reggio Emilia, schemas and outdoor play - and readings support participants in further study over the next few weeks. In this way they can attend each meeting having had a real opportunity to consider the implications of differing approaches and concepts for their own workplace. Adaptable modules enable students to follow a specific focus and develop an overall theme in their studies, thus engaging in action research cycles (Whitehead & McNiff 2006); two examples of this have been literacy and transitions. The growth of technology also supports this model of learning, both formally by means of WebCT (an intranet virtual learning environment) and informally through email groups initiated by participants with similar interests and concerns.

The following table identifies the specific and distinctive features which differentiate this model of postgraduate provision:

	Traditional model	Network model
Mode of delivery	Taught sessions on a weekly basis. Teaching staff are likely to be attached to specific modules	Monthly network meetings to include planned input plus discussion time Network leaders remain constant
Content	Narrow focus on one specific module	Broad focus to include all participants' interests
Participants	Specific cohort studying each module. Participants are likely to learn alongside different students when they move on to a new module	Several different cohorts learning together. Group membership remains stable and consistent throughout students' participation
Mode of progression	Students complete one module at a time from a range of choices	Students join the network at any point in a rolling programme

Evaluation

This programme is now in its fourth year. There are three main cohorts although some participants have joined the network part way through an academic year. The first group are currently writing dissertations but still attend the group on a regular basis. Evaluation of this programme comes from three primary data sources, namely ongoing evaluations done on a regular basis in order to monitor students' experience, journals and reflective writing which support professional development and individual interviews.

Five main themes emerge from evaluation of the network as a mode of study. The advantages of this approach can be identified as:

- a forum in which to explore issues and consider implications for practice
- increased knowledge and understanding (resulting in extended and/or improved practice)
- the opportunity to reassess values
- reinforcement of values
- support of the group through a learning community

Although these themes interlink and are related, each of them will be considered separately.

The opportunity to explore issues and consider implications for practice

The major benefit of the network for all students is, not surprisingly, as a supportive environment in which participants discuss and debate issues of interest to them as practitioners. Those working in the Early Years are dedicated and committed to young children and the network is a forum in which this commitment can be pursued. Many participants have commented on the 'authority' postgraduate study gives to their ideas and suggestions in the workplace. For instance one nursery manager who became a Children's Centre leader shortly after joining the network commented that it has:

Given me confidence to question my practice and implement change backed up by theory and research.

Day (1999) points out that 'learning from experience alone will ultimately limit development' and the insight gained from this sort of reflection highlights the need for a space in which professional practitioners can engage in critical thought and dialogue in order to move on from simple experiential learning.

As a result of her involvement in the network, one Year 1 primary teacher was asked to give a presentation on learning through play to the teachers of the older classes and wrote in a reflective account:

I feel that although some colleagues will regard the use of the outdoors and the use of play as frivolous and to the detriment of formal lessons, I can now support my opinion and feel I have made an informed judgement as to the benefits of play and the outdoor environment with regard to children's learning. Stone (1995, cited in Glascott Burriss & Foulks Boyd, 2005:47) states that 'To keep outdoor play in the schools where it exists, and to return play to schools devoid of play will require courageous people to step forward.'

Beside this one of the tutors has commented - Be courageous!

Increased knowledge and understanding, extending and improving practice

Most of the participants in the network have been in practice for a number of years and so it is some time since they undertook any formal study. An opportunity to revisit theory and to relate new knowledge to their experience as practitioners is something which all find particularly rewarding. Because the flexible nature of the network allows everyone to adapt their study to their own particular situation, this does not only apply to those working directly with children. For instance, an Early Years Advisor comments that the network:

... helped me to develop my practice by reflecting on my role in the process of helping others to develop and address specific issues too. My confidence has increased as a result of gaining a detailed knowledge of recent theory.

In this way, good practice is spread wider than the immediate network and others working in the field also benefit.

The opportunity to reassess values

With the day to day demands of working with children it can be hard to step back and find the time and space to reconsider and question one's own practice. When they first join the network, students are introduced to the use of a learning journal and portfolio. Portfolio building is familiar to most students nowadays but a learning journal is a new concept to many. However, once they begin to record their ideas, reactions and reflection, participants find these a really powerful tool to reinforce and chart their learning journey. Formal recording in this way (whether in a written diary, a file or in electronic form) enables them to think about ideas and values and to question everyday assumptions:

... [use of a learning journal] has charted development in my understanding and knowledge and revealed certain insecurities and self doubt, but also demonstrates increasing confidence as well.

(Lindsay, Local Authority Early Years Advisor)

The increasing confidence identified here comes about as a result of opportunities for students to consider their value base and reassess the relationship between this and everyday practice. In this way the forum fosters the opportunity to engage in 'double loop' learning (Argyris, 2005) in which practitioners can question not only their actions but also the values that underpin them as is demonstrated by this classroom teacher:

Whilst I know it is important in Key Stage 1 to incorporate play in the curriculum, I need to be able to justify this with evidence. Some of the research into how children learn best has made me reappraise my classroom management. I recognise that I must analyse and be more reflective upon my teaching on a regular basis, rather than concentrating on what has worked well or gone wrong during the day. I must look for a deeper and more objective understanding of teaching and learning within my classroom.

(Laura, Y1 teacher)

Reinforcement of values

Ideally the work place should also function as a learning community and support would come from work colleagues (Brown et al, 2001). However in practice not all participants feel that their values are shared, particularly within primary schools where the pressure of league tables and testing sometimes threatens to overwhelm teachers who attempt to maintain a play-based pedagogy (Moyles, 1994). One classroom teacher comments:

Great to get together with likeminded people. Feel stronger to make changes in my own class. Encouraged me to undertake reading to support my beliefs.

(Natalie, Y1 teacher)

In these circumstances, dialogue with others who share these same principles can do much to support practitioners who feel isolated in an unsupportive environment. A learning community which shares the same values can reaffirm principles and provide reassurance that a child-centred ideology is not simply a romantic and unrealistic fantasy! As one nursery teacher commented:

...I have discovered that I do not want to be part of a system that is simply preparing children for adulthood or part of a system that does not value the early years of a child's life as a unique and very special time.

The development of a learning community

Early Childhood has always been an interdisciplinary, multiprofessional field; however, the recent drive to forge closer links between different professionals exemplified in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2004) has focussed attention on the need to create strategies to foster these partnerships. A real strength of the network is the multiplicity of roles of those involved. Thus expertise comes from within the group itself rather than being tutor-led and thus helps to empower participants outside the confines of their studies:

Because we all come from different backgrounds and share with one another, we learn and extend each other's views, ideas and build on our learning.

(Keira, playgroup leader)

Undertaking postgraduate work alongside a demanding and challenging job is not easy and the support of others has been a key factor in the success of the network. Since the beginning there have been two babies born (both of whom accompanied their mothers to meetings in their first weeks), as well as marriages, home relocations and new jobs. An additional consequence of the network has been to sustain morale and momentum beyond the requirements of coursework. Participants have visited each others workplaces and established meaningful working relationships between various settings. One evaluation stated:

[The network] has given me enthusiasm – keeping me going when times are difficult. Feels almost achievable!

(Sally, former nursery manager, now Children's Centre leader)

The broader picture

The necessity of such opportunities for CPD is clearly evident when considered against the European policy agenda established by the Lisbon Strategy (Lisbon European Council, 2000). This sets out strategic aims by which Europe can meet the challenges of globalisation and the knowledge economy. Ensuing debate has resulted in a range of initiatives and directives examining education policy and practice with the purpose of achieving a balance between social inclusion and supporting the realisation of individual potential. Fredriksson (2003) distinguishes between these two goals and has argued that lifelong learning can also be seen as a market-oriented goal intended to improve the efficiency of employees and that this perspective frequently dominates political agendas. However, whether regarded as quality enhancement or an opportunity to nurture future citizens able to engage in critical debate and dialogue, that is, as a utilitarian or as a humanist goal, the vital role played by Early Years practitioners in the agenda for lifelong learning is evident. Peter Moss (2007) argues for Early Childhood provision as a site in which democratic practice at institutional, local, regional, national and European level should take place. He draws attention to the fact that targets set in Barcelona in 2002 for member states to provide child care to at least 90% of children from 3 to mandatory school age by 2010 'in line with [national] patterns of provision' fails to take account of previously identified Quality Targets (EC Childcare Network, 1996). Moss suggests that whilst a uniform European approach across all aspects of policy and practice is neither practical nor desirable, nonetheless it is feasible to arrive at a set of agreed values, principles and objectives. The British government's target of a skilled graduate Early Years Professional in every children's centre by 2010 and all registered day care provision by 2015 is in line with the Barcelona directive. The next step is to provide opportunities for these practitioners to engage in critical thought, dialogue and reflection about principles and objectives and to equip them with the research tools necessary to enable them to engage in dialogue with academics and those who develop policy. Almost a decade ago, Tricia David identified that practitioner research is almost universally valued (1998) and in the intervening years more encouragement and opportunities for this have developed. However this is still far less

accessible for those working outside the statutory school sector and practitioners working with the youngest children continue to have less potential to be heard.

Conclusions

The Early Childhood Network has evolved over time, developing in response to tutor evaluation and student feedback. The first cohort began on a module of self-assessment and action planning, therefore sessions revolved around discussion of practice. However, evaluation towards the end of the first year identified that students would appreciate some more formal 'taught' input to supplement this. Therefore there is now always a planned focus to serve as a stimulus to debate; this is frequently tutor-led but there are also many occasions when it is student-initiated.

A number of strengths and advantages result from this model of postgraduate provision when compared to traditional programmes:

- Responsive to the needs of students – the provision fits the needs of participants rather than the other way around.
- Develops from interests of participants – flexibility of modules allow individual interpretation thus ensuring that study is personally meaningful. There is an opportunity to follow through specific themes in a series of action research cycles.
- Development of a learning community that involves both tutors and students as equal partners.
- Multiprofessional networking that reinforces interdisciplinary learning and forges good working relationships.

As is the case with undergraduate provision, tutors' pedagogy within the network stems from good Early Years practice. Thus the main principles underpinning the organisation of the network are that students actively construct their own knowledge (Piaget, 1978), that this learning process is socially negotiated whereby higher mental functions are mediated through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and that learning is set within a meaningful context (Donaldson, 1987). The significance of this approach to learning, regardless of the age or educational stage of the learner, emphasises the fact that learning is a lifelong enterprise.

The initial cohort of students, no longer involved in modules as they are engaged in researching for dissertations, continues to participate in the network. This ongoing involvement and loyalty to the group highlights its success as a learning community which empowers its members by enabling them to engage in lifelong learning, enhance professional qualities, close the theory practice gap and share knowledge (Chambers, 2001). The benefit of such a network supporting *all* Early Years professionals in becoming reflective practitioners is evident, regardless of whether they are working in schools or other settings.

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