

An Integrated Early Year Professional Status Pathway Pilot Project: Centre for Early Childhood, Institute of Education

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Introduction

This report aims to introduce a research project that has been built on the basis of an evaluation of a pilot project “An Integrated Early Year Professional Status Pathway”, which is being carried out at the Centre for Early Childhood (CEC) (2008-2010). This paper explains the background of the research, ideas that underpin its theoretical and methodological framework and some of the initial findings. The research team will be producing further reports expanding on the research processes and findings in more detail.

Background of the pilot project

Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) is part of the Government’s strategy to professionalise the childcare workforce. EYPS is an important initiative because the Government has set a challenging aim to provide an Early Years Professional (EYP) in every full day-care setting by 2015.

Reardon (2009) comments that the Government sees EYPs as future change agents who will transform the early years services. They will achieve this by:

- Raising the quality of early years provision
- Leading practice across the EYFS
- Supporting and mentoring other practitioners
- Modelling the skills and behaviours that safeguard and support children.

(Reardon 2009: p. 4)

Candidates gain EYPS through an assessment procedure which requires that they meet 39 standards. The standards require that candidates demonstrate skills of leading early years practice. Until the start of this pilot project, EYPS had only been open to graduates who were experienced practitioners. Pilot projects initiated by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) aim to provide undergraduate students with an opportunity to graduate and achieve an EYPS at the same time.

The Centre for Early Childhood successfully tendered a bid to CWDC to run a two year pilot pathway to EYPS involving fifteen undergraduate students from the BA Early Childhood degree. These students were entering their second year of studies. As part of the project, the pilot students were required to increase their amount of practice experience to 18 weeks, to enable them to meet the EYPS assessment criteria. A programme of support workshops was put in place to help students prepare for the final assessment at the end of the two years. Each EYPS candidate is supported by a mentor who has an EYPS.

Roots of the research project

This research project is rooted within the contractual project evaluation that the CEC have committed to carrying out over two years.

Originally, the evaluation was formulated as two key strands:

1. Programme organisation, content and quality of student experience against milestones and quality criteria;
2. Impact of the programme on the candidate, employer (setting), practice, wider workforce (LA), and outcomes for children and families.

(Centre for Early Childhood 2008)

These two strands were expected to provide sufficient data to assess whether the project had been a success and identify implications of the project for all the stakeholders. However, in the early stages of the evaluation process it became apparent that the focus of the project was the development of professional identity, the boundaries of which have not yet been defined. Therefore the third strand of the research was formulated and planned as:

3. Pedagogical environment that is conducive to the development of an EYP's professional identity.

Theory and methodology

Methodological demands of the first two strands required traditional methodological techniques of evaluation. The third key strand raised issues that could not be considered in a traditional linear way; instead, it demanded a theoretical and methodological response that could meet the demands of developing a relatively new professional identity of an EYP and that could respond to individual needs of all the participants. The choice of the theory reflected this need.

The research project is predicated upon the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) which argues that individuals develop through participation in activities (Vygotsky, 1978), that is, practices that have evolved as part of the history of particular socio-cultural contexts. Activities develop over time in response to the social collective need (Leontiev, 1978); it is through identification of the social need that it becomes possible to define the activities in which individuals participate. As the world of professionalism is rapidly changing, so are the activities through which professional identity is formed. CHAT argues that that in order to explore the development of professional identity all activities in which individuals participate should be studied (Engeström, 1999).

CHAT also argues that innovations in practices are developed through what Engeström (1987) refers to as expansive learning. He argues that individuals working together should analyse the activities in which they participate, understand what drives these activities and what constrains their development, and reformulate the content and tools of their work through systematic and continuous team work. These are the main features of Developmental Work Research (DWR) (Engeström, 1987), which was chosen as the main theoretical and methodological framework for this research project. The main research question, framed within this theoretical perspective, is 'How should activities which form an EYPS pilot be transformed to ensure the best possible pedagogical environment for EYPS candidates to develop their professional identity?'

Methods

The primary tool of DWR is a series of workshops that involve representatives from the different stakeholder groups that participate in the project. The workshops are video-recorded. Five workshops have been conducted so far. They have involved EYPS candidates, their mentors and CEC staff. Workshops are designed on the basis of the analysis of the data collected prior to a workshop. Data collected as a result of running workshops are also analysed and some of the findings are used in further workshops. In this

project, the following data have been collected to support DWR workshops:

- Interviews with EYPS candidates (at the beginning and end of the academic year);
- Written feedback from the candidates, which informed about how they combined the BA course, EYPS pilot workshops and practice experience;
- Written feedback from mentors who commented on the processes that mentoring involved;
- Written reflective feedback from CEC staff;
- CEC staff away day discussions of the EYPS pilot;
- Interviews with employers at the settings where EYPS candidates have undertaken their practice experience;
- Interviews with the candidates at the settings where they have undertaken their practice experience.

Initial findings

There were initial concerns that combining BA and EYPS would prove to be too challenging for undergraduate students, but the analysis of early data has shown that BA and EYPS are complementing each other in terms of content. Candidates have commented that knowledge acquired studying for BA helps them with meeting EYPS standards in practice. The process of participating in the EYPS pilot has highlighted the fact that the BA course is grounded in progressive ideas of early years practices, which supports the candidates' interpretation of the 39 standards and their application in practice.

Maintaining the relationship between the BA and EYPS pilot is important for the development of professional identity. One of the initial concerns that candidates identified (and worked on) during workshops was professional confidence. The data analysis demonstrated that by the middle point of the academic year, candidates felt that they had improved their confidence as practitioners through working at the settings. They also acknowledged that by that point they had developed an awareness of what it means to lead practice and began to initiate various activities in the settings. However, it is only through completing the longest placement, at the end of the year, that they began to demonstrate aspects of what can be defined as 'skills of leading practice'. Thus, during the fifth workshop, the candidates initiated discussions, argued for their opinion and communicated with sufficient confidence with the mentors. After the workshop the CEC staff and EYPS candidates discussed what had been achieved, which further extended candidates' understanding of what it takes to lead early years practice. Through these sessions, by the end of the year, the content and tools of the activities that constitute the EYPS pilot had been collectively renegotiated.

At the final workshop, the candidates, whose confidence had significantly improved, pointed out a number of challenges to be addressed in the new academic year. One of them concerned the DWR methodology, which, in the candidates' view, should be adjusted better to their needs. These issues will be worked on in further workshops and decisions on how to run the research project in the future will continue to be taken collectively.

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