

Recontextualisation in the 'region' of early years professional knowledge

Jim Hordern, School of Education, Bath Spa University

Introduction: conceptualising knowledge for early years professionalism

Studies of professionalism underline the importance of the character of professional knowledge for defining and solving problems that arise in practice and for the sustenance of professional identity (Abbott 1988; Friedson 2001). However, despite the acknowledgement of the centrality of knowledge for professional formation in professions of all types, from the classical professions of medicine and law to the organisational and welfare professions, the nature of this knowledge often remains weakly defined and is often left unexplored. The constitutive role of knowledge in the professions has recently been addressed in social realist research in educational studies (i.e. Muller 2009; Beck and Young 2005). This research identifies how professional practice and identity is strongly influenced by knowledge structure, articulation and recontextualisation processes, drawing on Bernstein's (2000:52-4) notion of a knowledge 'region' as the site in which disciplinary knowledge is orientated towards the needs of professional practice. There is currently a lack of empirical work that could serve to iterate and characterise these conceptualisations through analysis of the dynamics of specific professions (or occupations). Through focused research on relevant processes in the early years professional field this project aims to advance understanding of how professional knowledge becomes a 'structured and structuring structure' (Maton 2000:149), as differently situated 'knowledges' articulate and are articulated by those involved in their selection, appropriation and transformation. In so doing, the project will provide the outline of a framework, building on the notions of 'recontextualisation' and the 'region', for the analysis of processes that shape the distinctive character of the knowledge that is foregrounded in curriculum, pedagogy and sites of early years professional formation.

To profile the constitution of early years professional knowledge this project aims to identify and explore (i) how knowledge from disciplines and practice is 'recontextualised' and validated within the early years knowledge 'region'; (ii) the types of knowledge that are considered valuable by 'recontextualising agents' and other key actors within the region (including practitioner bodies; curriculum developers; programme leaders; policy makers); (iii) pressures for change in the knowledge base brought about by the context of practice or driven by policy reform such as the introduction of 'Early Years Educator' and 'Early Years Teacher' roles; (iv) the 'weakness' or 'strength' of the region, and thus the capacity to develop the socio-epistemic conditions to sustain authoritative professional knowledge. Research activity aims also to further develop the notion of the 'region' as a locus for the analysis of the selection, appropriation, validation and transformation of professional and vocational knowledge.

The premise for this approach is a conceptualisation of the 'region' as a socio-epistemic entity into which professional knowledge is appropriated and transformed for the purposes of constituting a knowledge base for professional practice (Bernstein 2000; Muller 2009). This can be seen as involving the construction of an analytical lens through which the processes by which professional knowledge is ascribed with value and validity can be identified and better understood. To achieve this, the research will draw upon various approaches to the analysis of knowledge structure, including Bernstein's concepts of verticality, horizontality and grammaticality, and studies of how knowledge is transformed in curricula, pedagogy and workplaces (Evans et al. 2010) to interpret knowledge recontextualisation. To fully characterise the processes by which knowledge value is arbitrated the research process also aims to explore institutionalist and sociological accounts of professional change to analyse the socio-historical and cultural norms of early years professional practice that structure the 'soft infrastructure' of social relations between educational institutions, other professions, policy makers, employers and early years practitioners, and facilitate or constrain change in what is considered valuable knowledge.

Policy and reform in the early years ‘region’

The early years ‘region’ could be said to combine knowledge from various disciplinary origins including aspects of psychology, sociology and educational studies, and variably situated knowledge organised around, and developed from, the customary ‘problems’ of practice. Definitions of valuable early years professional knowledge are contested and subject to considerable policy-driven pressures. Policy reform initiated by the New Labour government in England increased the volumes of early years practitioners studying for higher education qualifications, often on programmes that were part time with work-based or blended elements (Edmond et al. 2007). The 2012 Nutbrown review, commissioned by the coalition government, recommended that the content of early years qualifications is ‘strengthened’ so that early years practitioners have the ‘necessary depth and breadth of knowledge and experience’ (Nutbrown 2012: 6, 11) for the challenges of their work. The government response to the Nutbrown recommendations sets out plans for the introduction of ‘Early Years Educator’ (Level 3) and Early Years Teachers (Graduate) roles (DfE 2013:7), which may lead to concomitant alterations in the early years curricula, and some reconfiguration of the knowledge base. This may also include greater influence from other related ‘regions’, such as that of schoolteaching, which it can be argued has suffered extensively from increasingly prescriptive diktats regarding teacher professional formation, a multiplicity of centrally-driven policy initiatives and changes in the nature of teacher autonomy and accountability (Beck and Young 2005; Beck 2009). Such developments may not necessarily even result in parity of esteem with schoolteaching, however, as Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) will not be available to those achieving Early Years Teacher (TACTYC 2013).

The knowledge of the early years ‘region’, and of related curricula, pedagogy and workplace practice, can be seen as an ‘enmeshed’ combination of knowledge types of variable ‘situatedness’ (Young 2006), which result from the interplay between the choices of ‘recontextualisation agents’ in the infrastructure of the region, the ‘structuring’ impact of the structures of the knowledge selected (Maton 2000), and the socio-historical and cultural norms of the profession and its institutions. The dynamics of knowledge recontextualisation are thus continually iterated in the specific interrelation between structure and agency that characterises the given region. In order to tackle both the ‘epistemic’ and ‘social’ dimensions of early years knowledge this research project needs to involve both (i) analysis of curriculum documents and processes of knowledge selection and appropriation; and (ii) interviews with staff involved in qualification and curriculum development at six higher education institutions involved with the Early Childhood studies Degrees Network, representatives of two awarding bodies and relevant bodies involved in early years professional formation. The variable character of relations between these social and epistemic aspects in processes of knowledge recontextualisation provides a key focus of this study, recognising the potential for the structure and purpose of different knowledge types to be misinterpreted by agents with particular levels of influence and control over curriculum, and for certain agents to dominate specific processes of recontextualisation in given domains. For example, it could be argued that the process of developing and implementing an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum leads to considerable political influence over the ‘appropriation’ of knowledge content for early years practice, while leaving practitioners to ‘transform’ knowledge for the specific contexts of their pedagogic roles. Similarly, using the terms devised by Evans et al.(2010), it can be suggested that processes of ‘content’, ‘pedagogic’, ‘workplace’ and ‘learner’ recontextualisation may be brought into tension by reform to the processes of early years professional formation, as the Early Years Teacher programme supersedes EYPS. This may occur as existing partnerships are disrupted, and new standards introduced.

It is also important to consider the extent to which knowledge connected with forms of early years professionalism often marginalised by policy makers are able to persist and be sustained within programmes of initial professional formation and related undergraduate programmes. For example, there are alternative pedagogic models that inform the fabric of early years professional formation in other European countries which, while not championed by current policy makers in England, persist within the curriculum of many programmes, forming an aspect of the conceptual knowledge base

introduced to new and existing early years practitioners. Conceptualisations of appropriate professional formation for early years practitioners are strongly influenced by national social and cultural contexts, how provision for young children articulates with notions of schooling, by the nature of the early years infrastructure, and by how early years practice is conceived (Oberhuemer 2005; Oberhuemer, Schreyer and Neuman 2010). Nevertheless, despite the specifics of national and local contexts, conceptually-grounded notions of professional practice, often developed locally through individual initiative, have the capacity to travel across national boundaries and exercise considerable influence on professionalism elsewhere.

The significance of professional association for the region

Professional formation is also strongly influenced by the extent to which existing professional associations are able to influence professional recognition and standing, negotiations with other professions, and the formulation and adaptation of expertise (Hordern 2013, 2014). Whereas a classical profession such as Medicine has developed and sustained modes of professional association which have the capacity to negotiate jurisdictional change and maintain high levels of control over patterns of professional formation and entry (Abbott 1988), professions associated with the education, care and protection of children and young people have struggled to develop effective forms of association in the U.K., perhaps primarily due to their strong connection to the welfare state, but also as a result of their contested nature of their professionalism (Cunningham 2008). Teaching, it could be argued, has long suffered from the lack of an effective professional body which can take responsibility for professional formation, negotiate the slings and arrows thrown at the profession by various politicians, and foreground notions of education which could challenge the pervasive regimens of instrumentalism built on human capital theory that currently predominate (Cunningham 2008; Lauder et al. 2012). This is despite considerable disquiet within the teaching profession regarding policy initiatives that have centralised and politicised control over the infrastructure through which educational knowledge is recontextualised. Similarly, forms of early years professional association, while vocal in criticising aspects of policy (TACTYC 2013), have only limited levels of influence on the tide of reform initiated by governments.

Studies of professional association in other contexts (i.e. Greenwood et al. 2002; Nordegraaf 2011; Karseth and Nerland 2007) have indicated the importance of professional bodies in steering professions through uncharted territory, by maintaining an effective ‘watch on the bridge’ that not only scans the horizon for potential threats and opportunities but has the knowledge and capacity to interpret the nature of those threats and opportunities for the wider profession. It is possible to suggest that a closely related aspect of this function is the capacity to recontextualise knowledge through the appropriation, selection and transformation of knowledge from external sources (i.e. through new development in the fields of knowledge production of related disciplines – psychology, sociology etc. and from related ‘regions’ i.e. teaching, social work), while ensuring that this new knowledge coheres with the internal structures that constitute the professional knowledge base. However, this cannot be seen as solely the responsibility of a ‘professional body’ as such, as the role of higher education institutions and practitioners themselves is vital for the production, selection, iteration and revision of existing and new professional knowledge. It is this process of validating, aligning and reshaping the knowledge base, while recognising its dynamic nature and relation to other disciplinary and ‘regional’ entities, that is crucially important for maintaining the conceptual resources that can support and sustain effective professional practice, professional jurisdiction and wider societal esteem (Abbott 1988; Friedson 2001; Muller 2009). Such arguments indicate that the ongoing professionalisation of early years work relies both on refining the ‘social’ and the ‘epistemic’ processes that support the constitution of early years professional knowledge.

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