**Workshop: 'Journeys through practice' 2-3pm**

**Are we there yet? Level 3 Early Years students’ journey to becoming practitioners**

**Introduction and Rationale for Research**

This research explores the practices, attitudes, knowledge and experience of sixteen to nineteen year-old full time, level 3, Early Years students acquire during their course. The study follows year one and two students over the period of an academic year. Using a mixed methods approach, students’ changes in their understanding of knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and practices that are required to become a practitioner are tracked. Borrowing a concept from practices in Reggio Emilia, this study makes the students' learning visible, to the researcher and to the student

My research interest stems from my work with Early Childhood Education and Care Students' (ECEC) students in a Further Education (FE) College. The research aims to identify how student practitioners develop their understanding of what it is to be an early years practitioner while studying a college based ECEC course and how they take this learning, or not, into practice. The research is being carried out to fulfil the requirements for my EdD studies at the University of Sheffield.

The qualifications of early years staff are recognised as one of the best predictors of the delivery of that quality provision (OECD 2012) especially those settings led by well qualified staff (Mathers 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, Osgood 2011) and those with a strong educational focus where trained teachers work alongside and support less qualified colleagues (Mathers 2011). Government recognise the impact of a qualified workforce, citing the NCT’s role in improving qualifications and training, including introducing Early Years Educators and Early Years Teachers without addressing the well documented concerns regarding, career structure, pay and the value of working with children (Cameron, Owen, & Moss, 2001; Colley, 2006; Osgood, 2006, Osgood, 2007; Nutbrown, 2012). More significantly, the recently updated EYFS (2014) has no change to requirement for staff who count in ratio, save for the name changes to Early Years Educator and Early years Teacher. The statutory guidance still allows unqualified practitioners to count in ratio, incongruent with the government’s assertion for a well-qualified workforce.

The Early Years Workforce has been a political football since the Ten-Year Strategy for Childcare (HMT, 2004) first proposed a graduate led and fully qualified workforce. The Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) developed a single qualification, which was met with disappointment from the sector; this was followed with a review of Early Years qualifications led by Professor Nutbrown (2012). The long awaited government response to the Nutbrown Review came with the publication of ‘More Great Childcare’ (2013) which alluded to a ‘new’ level 3 status of Early Years Educator and Early Years Teachers. The Early Years Educator qualifications were introduced for first teaching in September 2014. This delay meant a change in my research focus; I elected to gather data based on the student practitioners studying the current range of level 3, two year, National Diploma qualifications. Still committed to foregrounding the level 3 students’ voice I determined that, as there is to be a new standard, it would be relevant and important to establish how the current level 3 student practitioners articulate what it is to be an early years practitioner, in order to identify any changes brought about by the introduction of Early Years Educators.

Much is written about Early years practitioners identity (Colley, 2006; McGillivray, 2010; Osgood, 2011) and professionalism (Osgood, 2010; Lloyd & Hallet, 2010)There has been little research about the pre-service student practitioners, aged sixteen to eighteen who are the workforce of the future. The most recent data comes from the study, ‘Entry, Retention and Loss: A Study of Childcare Students and Workers’, by Cameron, Owen, and Moss (2001). This study provides a useful baseline to identify student demographic data, their motivations for joing a childcare and education course and their intetntions following completion of the course. Similarly Vincent and Braun (2011) foreground childcare students’ understanding of professionalism and vocational habitus however it does not address how the students acquire and apply their learning to practice and their understanding of the role of the early years practitioner.

**Research Questions**

After reviewing the literature, the field questions listed below were identified in order to answer the overarching question. The field questions examine the perspectives of Student practitioners, aged sixteen to nineteen, students who have secured employment following completion of their full time level three programme and three managers from differening Early years settings.

Field Questions:

* What is the role of the Early Years Practitioner?
* What knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions are required to be an Early years Practitioner
* Do the qualifications (level 3 Diplomas) support this transition?
* At 18, is the practitioner ready to meet the demands of policy and employer expectations?

**Research Methods and Methodology**

The boundaries of the research were defined by the selection of sixty Further Education colleges known to offer Early Years courses, including my home institution. An invitation to participate was sent to Heads of Departments, with a request to display the survey link on their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Students were alerted to the survey but were under no pressure to participate. One hundred and fifty three students from five geographical areas responded, with twenty-one agreeing to participate in the next stage of the research.

**Participants**

The study engages student practitioners in five of Further Education colleges and three managers from differing early years settings. A research ethics application was made following the university’s guidance and permission was granted for the proposed research to take place. Ethical considerations included obtaining consent from participants. The the students’ age is of concern. In England, the definition of a child is anyone under the age of eighteen however BERA guidelines refer to the UNCRC Article 12, stating, 'children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity (2011 p.6). Further Education is post compulsory education implying students have made a choice to enrol on the course, I would argue this suggests the students are of the age and level of maturity to give informed consent to participating in the study. Explicit permission was sought, and granted by the University’s Ethics Committee, confirming that parental permission is not required. All efforts have been made to preserve anonymity and confidentiality of participants and settings involved in the research. The electronic questionnaire gave the option to respondents to remain anonymous. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and, after transcription, were returned to the interviewees to be member checked. All recordings will be deleted following completion of the research and submission of the thesis.

**Methods**

The research used mixed methods in order to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Methods used were surveys, focus groups and interviews with student practitioners, employers and newly qualified Early Years practitioners (see table 1)

**Table 1 - Data Collection**

Parallel to the survey, two managers participated in semi-structured interviews, with a third interview pending. The focus group produced qualitative data in terms of the students’ journey. To date two interviews have been completed with student practitioners who have gained employment and two are planned for November 2014.

The first survey, at the start of the academic year, September 2013 asked what do the student practitioners consider the role of an Early Years practitioner, what knowledge and skills are required, do they consider their choice of childcare and education as a long-term career and what are they intending to do following their course. The second survey, at the end of the academic year (June 2014) asked student practitioners to reconsider the knowledge and skills required by early years practitioners and to reflect on whether they have the necessary knowledge and skills in order to take responsibility for children’s care, learning and development. Respondents to the survey were invited to contribute further by agreeing to be interviewed once they had secured employment.

The timing of the introduction of the Early Years Educator qualifications provided an opportunity for a third survey (September 2014) to establish a baseline at the end of the previous qualifications and to compare Early Years Educator students’ responses on the roles and responsibilities of Early Years Practitioners/Educators.

**Focus Group**

On reading, ‘A box of childhood: small stories at the roots of a career’ (Nutbrown, 2011), I was inspired by Nutbrown’s process of using childhood stories and memories to explore her career in ECEC. I began to reflect on my own journey that has led me to undertake doctoral level study, recalling these events evoked strong emotional responses that have contributed to my own values and beliefs regarding ECEC. In the focus groups, I use a creative approach to explore the students' journeys to professional formation. The notion of students reflecting on their own progress in order to identify what has made them whole, lends itself to this kind of introspection, and will be a practice they continue to develop and use as professionals, hopefully.

**Interviews**

Employers’ views are expressed in the Nutbrown Review (2012) and are essential in the development of any new vocational qualification (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009). Given the diverse nature of early years provision in England, I would argue gaining consensus is a challenge. However, in terms of this research I am seeking employers’ views with regard to their expectations of practitioners and whether there is a benefit, or not, to employing qualified practitioners and what the impact might be. Interviewees are from diverse settings

* Headteacher from a children’s centre
* Manager from a nursery group
* Manager from a day care setting

**Data Analysis**

I intend to use thematic approach to analysing the data. Using discourse analysis, themes will emerge from the early activities which can be explored in more depth at each phase of the research In this way, consistent factors may emerge which suggests they are key in the students' transition to practitioner status, and emerging factors over time will possibly produce a hierarchy, as well as charting progress in their thinking and their personal and professional development. The process of listening, transcribing and then reading the transcripts created familiarity with the data and reflected Charmaz’s (2005) assertion that closely engaging with the data helps the researcher to identify themes. It is my intention to use two complimentary frameworks to analyse the data, The Early Years Educator Criteria (National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2013) and Rose and Rogers, ‘Seven Selves of the Plural Practitioner’ (2012, p. 2) in order to compare the students’ expectations and experiences of what it is to be an Early Years practitioners with policy and contemporary research.

**Emerging findings**

* Students’ reasons for joining the ECEC courses centre on enjoyment of working with children, wanting to ‘help’ children learn and develop.
* More than half of the students are intending to progress to higher education
* A significant number of students, at the start of their academic journey, cite development, attention to the EYFS and support (with equal weight) as the main functions of Early Years practitioners, in year two, this changes. Promoting development becomes the prime function with support, activity planning and observation becoming more prominent as well as recognising employability skills development– patience, flexibility, organised
* Students are not consciously taking the knowledge and experiences learned on the course going in to practice.
* The quality of the teaching from the College or training provider

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