**Professionality and the early years educator:**

**implications for continuing professional development**

**An action-based study**

**Sarah Lightfoot**

**University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education**

**Wolfson College**

**Introduction**

In this paper I discuss professionality, how it relates to early years educators and how it might be supported through continuing professional development opportunities. I provide an overview of the theoretical background to my doctoral study which I characterise as action-based. I explain my rationale for planning a study which integrates research and action as I seek to combine research into the substantive issue of educator professionality with research into the process developing transformative CPD to support this. I explain my pragmatic approach to data collection. Consideration is given to the ethical approach of this type of educational research.

**Introduction**

My career in education spans 25 years. During that time I have worked at five schools, spending 17 years teaching the youngest children. My roles have been varied including time spent as a deputy head and acting head teacher and as advisory teacher for a large county council. I have been a school governor, chair of trustees for a kindergarten and a community playgroup leader. In addition to my work as an independent Early Years Foundation stage trainer and consultant, I am a tutor for the HertsCam Network, a teacher led charity providing a masters level degree and certificate courses for educators from the primary and secondary sectors. Education matters to me.

Accordingly, the focus of my research emanates from concerns I have encountered in my recent professional experiences as a Nursery teacher and in my role as a provider of continuing professional development opportunities (CPD) for Early Years Educators (EYEs). The research that I am undertaking is intricately bound to my personal experiences and professional perspective of what it is to be an educator of young children.

My perspective as a doctoral student stems from my own professional background, my identity and my role as a provider of professional development opportunities. I am enrolled upon a doctoral programme which is intended to support education professionals with ‘extending their understanding and improving practice in their schools and educational systems through researching and theorising policy and practice (‘Doctor of Education Programme,’ 2015).’ I can only seek to improve and understand my practice by practising and reflecting upon it, so it is that my research is morally driven and action-based in nature.

**My concern**

The stimulus for my doctoral research proposal was conversations with a range of early years educators. I was puzzled by the array of experiences, emotions and attitudes that EYEs expressed when discussing their work with young children. For some EYEs, recent policy change and innovations were exciting; opportunities to acquire professional status were to be embraced and hours outside of contracted time were spent finding and making resources to enrich children’s learning. Others were confused about change within the sector, revised frameworks and non-statutory frameworks, with one EYE saying

*If they would tell me what to do I’d just do it.*

Perceptions about increasingly intensified working conditions and downward pressure to ensure children were prepared for ‘formal’ schooling appeared for many to result in some degree of disillusionment with their role, whilst others reported feelings of inadequacy and at times a loss of control in their daily work.

**Conceptualising early years educators professional identity**

The stories from and discussions with EYEs appear to indicate these practitioners’ sense of professional identity. Although professional identity might be defined as one’s professional self-concept, based on multiple attributes, beliefs, values and motives (Ibarra, 1999), the concept of is not straightforward. It is not simply a matter of a role being adopted for instrumental reasons in the context of an occupation. It is not merely the sum total of attributes, beliefs, and values used to define people in specialised, skill- and education-based occupations or vocations (Benveniste, 1987; Ibarra, 1999). It is about who we are rather than the part we are playing.

Each EYE’s professional identity is bound to be unique on the grounds that there are many antecedent and contributory factors. It has long been argued that identity is always bound to be a ‘work in progress’ rather than a fixed state (Erikson, 1975). A comprehensive review of the literature on teachers’ professional identity supports this idea of identification being an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004).

Coldron and Smith (1999) found that teachers’ professional identity, while being unique, nevertheless reflects the educational context or landscape that he or she is part of and it is in classroom practice where this becomes visible. For some writers there is an emphasis on the struggle to define oneself when circumstances may appear to be demanding a different identity construction (MacLure, 1993). This may be linked to Hoyle’s (2008) discussion about the idea of teachers having a ‘samizdat professionalism;’ a strategy for being true to their values while satisfying externally generated requirements which might be at odds with these values. These experiences can be emotionally fraught as teachers attempt to maintain their ‘story to live by;’ a narrative thread that educators draw on to make sense of themselves and their practice (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999). The idea that educators might be engaged in some kind of struggle for their identity suggests that a crucial variable here is human agency. Professional identity is thus self-constructed (Bruner, 1996) and reflection emerges as having a key role to play in enabling individuals to construct their identities and keep them under review so to speak.

These themes are also apparent in the more recently emerged area of research concerning professional identity of EYEs across the sector in both maintained and non-maintained settings Although the research aims and methodologies employed differ, studies indicate that professional identity is dynamic rather than stable and fixed in biology and emphasise the social and discursive nature of these constructs (Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 2000). Some do not provide a clear definition of the concept but highlight its close connection to a number of other features of professionalism which may be internal or external to the individual. These include discussions of:

* the interplay between personal and professional identities (Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin and Vanderlee, 2012);
* practitioner gender and class (Osgood, 2006);
* the role of reflection in identity construction (Bleach, 2014);
* the influence of national policy on EYE professional identity (Woodrow and Busch, 2008) and
* the media’s portrayal of the EYE workforce (McGillivray, 2008).

What is evident from these differently emphasised studies is that although the notion of a single or blended definition of professional identity in the sector is problematic; there is an overriding consensus that each person’s professional identity is malleable and dynamic. It affects our behaviour and is affected by the experiences we have. This relates well to the findings of Stryker and Burke (2000) who précis Mead’s (1934) work on identity as ‘society shapes self shapes social behaviour.’

This has real implications for my work with EYEs. The conceptualisation of how educators acquire and use their identities has consequences for the kind of support needed from professional development opportunities My premise is if EYE professional identity can be shaped by ‘society’ then shaping the professional development opportunities I offer might potentially strengthen and help to reshape the professional identities of those EYEs who participate. This in turn should impact upon EYEs work with young children and their families.

My reflections paved the way for an exploratory study (Lightfoot and Frost, 2015) in which EYEs’ experiences of continuing professional development were considered. This indicated EYEs’ expressed needs in terms of preferences for CPD that would value them as educators, help them forge and make the most of connections with others and support them as they make a difference to the young children and their families with whom they work. These three expressed needs were starting point for my empirical work and fuelled my interest in finding alternative constructions of support for professional development.

The next section of this paper outlines the theory which influenced my approach to the development of an alternative approach to CPD; one which I suggest would satisfy the needs of EYEs like Sadie who says:

*In an ideal world I would like more head space…a mentor to talk to…time to plan, make changes, read, reflect, think with colleagues and with specialist advice when I need it. Then there would be excitement. CPD wouldn’t be an onerous task!*

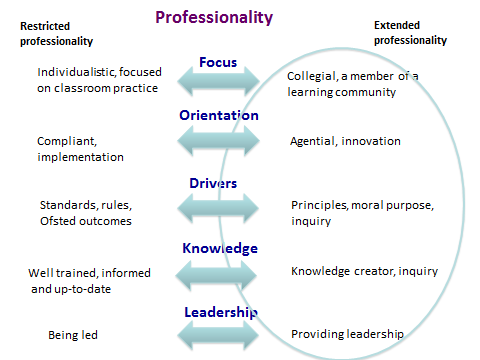
**Towards an alternative approach to CPD**

Sadie’s appeal appears to be for support to develop and use a particular type of ‘professionality;’ a term first used by Hoyle (1975) to indicate knowledge, skills and procedures employed by educators in the process of teaching. Hoyle later characterised teachers in this way:

A *restricted professional* was construed as a teacher for whom teaching was an intuitive activity, whose perspective was restricted to the classroom, who engaged little with wider professional reading or activities, relied on experience as a guide to success, and greatly valued classroom autonomy. An *extended professional* was construed as a teacher for whom teaching was a rational activity, who sought to improve practice through reading and through engaging in continuous professional development, who was happily collegial, and who located classroom practice within a larger social framework.

(Hoyle, 2008: 29)

The EYEs with whom I work do not necessarily report such extremes in the way that they enact their professionality. Frost (2013) represents professionality as a spectrum of behaviours as represented below. This has been a useful framework for me to consider as I planned an intervention to develop opportunities for EYEs to move along this continuum and broaden their professionality from being less restricted to more extended in scope.



**Figure 1** Frost (2013)

What is clear is that a training model of CPD is less likely to develop ‘extended professionality.’ It fails to inspire and cultivate moral purpose and leads to very little change in practice (Day, 1999; Little, 1994). I would suggest that it neither addresses the expressed needs of the EYEs in my exploratory study for opportunities that value and make use of their professional experiences, ideas and enthusiasms help them to make connections with other professionals or make a lasting difference in their work with young children.

Through my association with the HertsCam teacher network1 I am familiar with the work of Frost (2014) and the developing theory of ‘non-positional leadership.’ This builds upon Hoyle’s idea of extended professionalism to propose that leadership is a potential capacity for all educators, regardless of designated roles and positions of authority within an educational organisation and is bolstered by Fullan’s (1993) argument that teacher leadership should be for all. The model below indicates the key elements of this theory and the approach taken by the HertsCam network.

**Figure 2** Frost (2014)

Participants in the HertsCam programmes (of one or two year’ duration) are supported through the network to develop strategies that enable them to exercise leadership and extend their professionality. This capacity is operationalised through the idea of the development project whereby individual teachers are invited to identify a professional concern and then act strategically to address it.

Teachers become then agents of change in their schools and creators of professional knowledge. Projects also build organisational capacity for example, initiating and extending collaboration between colleagues that leads to further change and improvement. Stories and accounts demonstrating these acts of non-positional leadership and its transformational effects are well documented and plentiful, further explicating this emergent vision for developing an extended professionality (Frost, 2014) offering me real optimism and encouragement for my proposed work with early years educators.

The principles of non-positional leadership and the considered support systems put into place to enable teachers to engage in this strategic and highly collaborative development work fit well with my own aims to provide CPD opportunities for EYEs which engage and develop their professionality in their workplaces.

**An action based approach**

As a practitioner working in a professional context I have identified a particular problem and want to explore ways of addressing it through doctoral study. My concern is to develop and instigate a form of CPD which will positively impact on EYEs’ professionality. A core value for me is my commitment to making a positive difference to the lives of young children in our school system through my work with early years educators (EYEs). This moral perspective compels me to act as a practitioner but also shapes my perspective and chosen action –based approach to my research.

My study integrates research and action. I seek to combine research into the substantive issue of educator professionality with research into the process developing transformative CPD to support this.

I have planned an action based initiative that I intend to be effective in terms of valuing educators, helping them to forge and make the most of connections with others and supporting them as they make a difference to the lives of children and their families; impacting both themselves and their contexts. I aim to develop and offer transformative continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities that are intended to have an immediate and lasting impact on educators, the young children they teach, their schools and the wider community. However, I recognise that the mobilisation of EYEs’ enormous potential requires specific support, in terms of planned intervention and dedicated structures, activities and tools to inspire them and enable them to develop this prospective aspect of their professional identities. I want to use the research as a way of developing myself as an advocate for those working in this educational sector by articulating and amplifying EYEs’ voices throughout the research project (Apple, 2006).

It is my intention that the leadership of this action will inform and generate insights, knowledge and understanding about both the issue and the process.

The following sets out in further detail the themes and initial research questions I envisaged for the study. The questions derive from my overarching focus its aims and related themes. These are intended to serve as a guide as I carry out the research process. Crucially they are directly related to both improving practice and contributing to the body of knowledge about the issue and the process I have chosen to focus upon. The questions are written in a manner which does not require a correct, preconceived answer. They are open-ended and thematic and thus lend themselves to a qualitative approach. They are concise enough to provide focus and inform the data set to be collected and analysed.

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| ***Theme 1: Professional identity and professionality***  Question 1: How do early years educators enact their professionality?  Question 2: What types of intervention, structured tools and activities help EYEs to use, develop and reflect upon their professionality in their everyday work? |
| ***Theme 2: Transformative CPD***  Question 3: What are the features of programmes in which participants would experience being valued, having connections and making a difference  Question 4: What is the impact of this type of CPD upon children’s learning, EYEs’ learning and organisational learning? |
| ***Theme 3: Advocacy***  Question 5: How could this process be documented and shared within the early years education community? |

**Figure 3** Themes and research questions

My data collections strategies are underpinned by my aims and the themes and questions connected to them. What I am concerned with is collecting a wide variety of evidence in a way that helps me glean information about and understand:

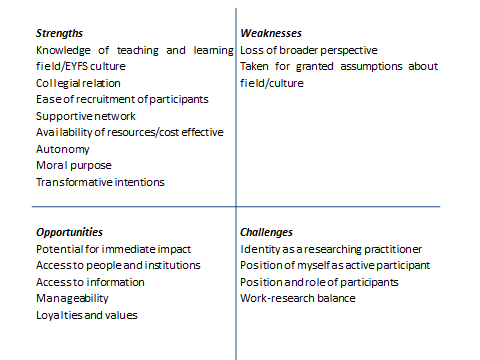
* the EYEs’ *professional identities* in terms of their developing professionality;
* their *projects* in which they collaborate with colleagues and their impact on the development of their practice,
* and the learning and knowledge being built in terms of the *effectiveness of the CPD programme* in enabling them to do this.

I plan to contribute to the literature concerning the extent that professional learning opportunities such as the programme I have developed influence professional identity (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Evidence from my data sets will be collated and annotated so I can analyse it, reflect on it, share it with others involved or affected by what I do and interrogate it in the more public sphere of the HertsCam Network, my EdD community and further afield (Reynolds *et al.*, 2011). Crucially this evidence will not be analysed after the CPD course is completed as a summative exercise. Rather, in keeping with an action-based approach (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009), the evidence will be reviewed at particular points in the year, additionally it will also be used flexibly from session to session to feed into planning and supervision appropriate for the participants’ needs (Seale, 1999).

I have made pragmatic choices about the types of evidence I document and use to inform my research questions. My approach will entail documenting evidence garnered from more traditional collection sources but will also necessitate capturing less structured and ephemeral evidence from programme activities and the tools used for professional development as a way to triangulate and enrich my emerging understanding (Kemmis, Taggart and Nixon, 2014). More conventional methods designed will comprise a reconnaissance, periodic review points, focus group interviews, feedback sheets and keeping a research journal. Those from the programme itself will include programme activities, annotated photographs, conversations, records of participants’ presentations, stories and posters supervisions and portfolios. The effectiveness of these tools and techniques in helping me demonstrate the validity or ‘worthwhileness’ (Dadds, 1995:174) of my research and particularly the impact of the programme rests on the authenticity and variety of the evidence they yield.

**Ethical considerations**

With respect to the ethical nature of my proposed research I need to ask: as a researching practitioner to whom am I accountable and for what? Appleby (2013) advises caution as in her view my proposed research entails me adopting two potentially conflicting ethical stances, that of the university and that of the workplace; balancing and protecting the interest of these two separate parties might she suggests present real challenges. I have attempted to explore some of the ways that being an insider researcher ‘enhances the depth and breadth of understanding to a population that may not be accessible to a non -native (Kanuha, 2000:444),’ but have also questioned, as advised by Breen (2007) and Winpenny (2010), the extent to which these ways raise issues concerning proximity, ethics and power relations. These reflections are demonstrated in the SWOT analysis I carried out (Figure 4 below).



**Figure 4** SWOT analysis of insider researcher position

I appreciate the need for reflexivity throughout the research process and my instinct is that I ought to embrace my subjectivity rather than attempt to apologise for it or seek to minimise it (Stenhouse, 1975). I recognise the constant need, pointed out by Pillow (2003), to reflect upon my position and actively manage myself to acknowledge my thinking, my assumptions and behaviour throughout the whole process and so achieve my research aims.

Ethical principles of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and non-malevolence rightly inform my work and as a doctoral student I am expected to conduct my research in accordance with the guidelines of British Educational Research Association and seek ethical approval from the University. However, in common Gerrish (1997) I have found there is often a lack of understanding within these guidelines as to how these principles play out in community, action-based insider research such as my own. There is a distinction here as highlighted by Macfarlane, (2010:22) between *procedural ethics* which is about satisfying obligations laid down by the University and *ethics in practice* ‘where the real challenges lie in making decisions in the field.’

Macfarlane’s (2010:25) approach to ‘living the virtues’ appeals to me. It seems to emphasise a ‘personalised, relational and responsive approach to the ethics of insider research’ (Duncan and Watson, 2010:53) and offers a way in which the tacit knowledge I possess in my professional role can be made explicit in my researcher role (Sternberg and Harvath, 1999). It connects with my professional values and my compulsion for authenticity in my work. It reminds me of my skills as an Early Years Educator and school leader and the many years I have spent ‘thinking on my feet’ and responding to the unique challenges of working with young children, their families and school staff on a daily basis. In my work as a teacher I have always aimed to act with acceptance, care, understanding and trust as advocated by Drummond, Rouse and Pugh (1992). I have no reason to think that my aims in my work as a doctoral researcher should be any different.

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