Head, Heart and Hands: Constructing a holistic approach to professional identity and professional development in the early childhood workforce.

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Abstract

The field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been engaged in discussions about professionalism of the workforce for a considerable period. This paper proposes a holistic model of professional identity construction that considers three elements; the head (utilising reflections on knowledge, reason and thinking), the heart (exploring passion, feelings and values and beliefs) and the hands (which represents professionalism as worked out in practice in the workplace). It suggests how these aspects can be constructed into a model of professionalism that remains fluid and flexible, and is able to respond to changing demands. There is evidence to suggest that the model can be utilised as a professional development (PD) tool for use with students and practitioners in the field.

Introduction

The field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been engaged in discussions about professionalism and professionalisation of the workforce for a considerable period (Katz ,1985; Brock, 2012). However, there is general agreement about the difficulty of coming up with a simple definition of professionalism or what makes a professional and it has been suggested that these concepts are not universally understood (Simpson, 2010; Oberheumer, 2005; Furlong et al., 2000).

Examining the literature around early childhood professionalism it can be seen that ideas in ECEC are often compared with constructs and concepts drawn from other fields such as sociology, philosophy, education and management. An example is the approach of Lloyd and Hallet (2010) who suggested there is a traditionally accepted framework of a professional which could be utilised. They recognised that this model included 3 main elements; 'the monopolisation of specific and exclusive skills and knowledge; group member solidarity and restricted access to learning opportunities

requiring accreditation to practice' (p.76). However, others in the field of early years are looking for a model that emerges from the workforce rather than one imposed on them (Brock, 2012; Osgood 2006) as they argue (Musgrave, 2010; Goouch,2010; Chalke, 2013) a more highly qualified workforce should be able to contribute to the discussion of what makes a professional.

Emerging from my doctoral research I propose a holistic model that allows examination of how practitioners are talking about their professionalism and the key factors that influence professional identity constructions. The model considers three elements; the head (utilising reflections on knowledge, reason and thinking), the heart (exploring passion, feelings, values and beliefs), and the hands (which represents professionalism as worked out in practice in the workplace). These three areas are directly related to the person and their expressions of identity and professionalism and provide a way of ethically exploring the integrity of individual stories in line with Hollway and Jefferson's idea of a "Gestalt principle" (p.68) that seeks a holistic interpretation.

This model exemplifies a consideration of professional identity that remains fluid and flexible, and is able to respond to changing external demands and manage tensions that arise in daily working practice. I propose that it can be utilised not just as a research tool to examine how early childhood practitioners are constructing their identity but as a professional development (PD) tool for use with students and practitioners in the field to help them examine, discuss and take ownership of shaping their own professional personas.

The professionalisation of ECEC context and definitions

The ECEC workforce is a complex organism, (Adams, 2008) and issues around professionalisation are not fixed or concrete, but rather need interpreting and reinterpreting in the light of changing societal, political and economic discourses. Woodrow (2008) advocated that 'to seek a fixed position is futile: professionalism has always been a changing concept' (p.275) and Ortlipp, Woodrow and Woodrow (2011) contended that because there are 'multiple discourses of professionalism and pedagogic practice' (p.57) it is possible for early childhood practitioners to engage in a form of agency to resist or reject some of these. Osgood (2006) in particular argued for practitioners to be significantly involved in creating their own professional

identity, she suggested that one of the key aspects that professionals in early childhood need to embrace is a social constructivist approach to identity and role definition. In relation to this Miller (2008) made the case that students and training providers should be part of the process of helping early year practitioners develop a sense of professional identity. In order to do this practitioners, need to develop 'effective reflective and reflexive practice' (Osgood, 2006 p.11), as reflexivity allows them not only to engage a deeper level of understanding but will also enable them to develop and take their ideas forward. I argue the head, heart and hands model provides a creative and flexible framework and the affordances for accessibility for practitioners, students, tutors and researchers for that reflective practice to occur.

Methodology

A narrative research project was undertaken with practitioners who were working with children aged 0-4 and who had studied at university part time to degree level to explore their professional life histories. I agreed with Court et al.'s (2009) view that in preschool teaching 'personal and professional are intimately intertwined' (p.208) and therefore a narrative framework provided a vehicle for exploring these aspects. It also afforded an ability to hear practitioners' voices, aligning with Riessman (2008) who suggested identities are narratives that people tell about themselves and that in collecting stories about experiences, aspects of identity are also revealed. Others such as Slay and Smith (2011) also supported a narrative approach as they suggested that people come to know who they are through the stories they tell about specific struggles at specific points in time and Connelly and Clandinin (2006) proposed that 'people shape their daily lives by the stories of who they are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories (p.477). A narrative approach therefore allowed the exploration of personal and professional experiences in ECEC.

Czarniawaska (2004), argued the idea of narrative can be used 'in various ways and at different stages of the approach' (p.1) illustrating the ways in which narratives are created at all stages of the research process, starting from the stories told by the participants and how these can be shared and reconstructed in the process of narration, moving through analysis into the final account that is written by the researcher. It is this approach that represents the methodological ideology of my

research. In embracing this aspect of narrative methodology I situated myself as a constructivist and interpretive researcher (Grieg et al., 2007), who was making an effort to understand how the lives of some practitioners in ECEC had enabled them to view themselves as professionals in the field, through exploring the stories they tell of themselves and their practice. I recognised the stories themselves as unique, but I anticipated they would present features that could be identified by others working in the sector.

Ethics

Sikes (2010) talked about as the 'heavy ethical burden'(p.11) in writing life histories and narratives. Submitting an ethical application form to the university allowed for the completion of the procedures to commence the research, but undertaking the interviews was the place where I encountered the real ethical journey. The researcher participant relationship is often considered to be one where the researcher holds the power (Elliot, 2005), although as the participant is the one who controls what they want to say they could be viewed as powerful in this instance. Measor and Sikes (1992) considered narrative interviewing could also give rise to an intimacy in relationship where there is more ambiguity and a sense of reciprocity in the process. I wanted to try to acknowledge this perhaps shifting power differential. I sought to ensure the participants were comfortable and had some ownership of the process where possible through offering choices. These consisted of where the interviews were to be held, allowing checking of interview scripts (Fraser, 2004), and through encouraging the opportunity for personal choices of pseudonym (Newman, 2010).

Brock (2001) in a very similar type of research study suggested that the power relationship she had with her research participants could have affected the validity of her research, however I think in my own situation while I acknowledge the differential I do not believe the issue of concern to primarily be one of validity because of the narrative method employed. Narrative researchers such as Elliot (2005) argue that it is not effective to try and bring ideas about validity from a positivist paradigm into a methodology that is constructivist and interpretive, rather it is the research question

and methodology that should be examined and deemed trustworthy (Riessman, 2008). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and Goodley et al (2004) talked instead about the need for authenticity in the way stories are captured and presented.

I felt secure in the knowledge that the participants had chosen to entrust their stories to me for interpretation and the fact that in places the interviews became more of a shared conversation at times indicated that we were working at creating meaning together (Elliot, 2005). In this respect I recognised that in bringing myself into the research process and specifically into the interviews I was working with my own sense of knowledge creation (Sikes, 2010).

A series of in depth interviews each lasting 1 to 1and 1/2 hours was carried out that yielded large amounts of rich data and it was during the process of analysis that the model of head, heart and hands evolved. It emerged as an approach that allowed me to continue seeing my participants as individuals rather than as disparate pieces of coding and satisfied the requirement for meaning making in a way that was both 'creative as well as analytic' (Mello, 2002 p.235). It started as a physical task where large silhouettes were used into which parts of the narrative from the in-depth interviews were cut and pasted. The silhouettes allowed for the categorisation of statements and stories told to me under the aspects of head (knowledge, reason and thinking), heart (passion, feelings, values and beliefs) and hands (practice and the workplace), this method I termed 'Holistic Silhouette Analysis'. These three elements were chosen because they were directly related to the person and their expressions of identity and professionalism, but also allowed the consideration of external factors, to be incorporated and the underlying stories to be examined to see how they shaped the individuals concerned. It also satisfied an ethical requirement for me for the individuals to remain represented in a holistic way at this stage of the process.

These three elements had connections to my own values and beliefs about early childhood practice and certain pedagogic principles that have influenced me as I recognised the head, heart and hands of Pestalozzi's (1746-1827) and Steiner's (1861-1925) holistic approaches to the education of the child sympathetically represented in my diagrams. From this initial data sifting it was possible to distil the essence of what represented individual professional identity in the different aspects while also recognising they were linked together. It was then possible to examine

whether the identities constructed were embracing or resisting wider discourses of professional identity which are privileging a technical construction of professionalism (Osgood, 2012) that focuses on performativity of practice based tasks that can be assessed. In purposefully engaging with not just the external aspects but also with heart based /emotive narratives as part of the data reduction process it allowed stories of professionalism to emerge.

Findings

Presenting the narratives from the data in the three categories allowed exploration of individual areas of head, heart and hands but also the examination of conflicts and tensions that present at the intersections between these aspects of professional identity. Clandidni et al. (2010) recognised tension as part of an educator's workplace, as well as part of the research process so it was not surprising to find it within the narratives told. An overarching theme that ran through all of them is how they managed the tensions that exist for them and how they resisted or responded to both internal constraints - their own beliefs and values and external constraints such as policy dictates and bodies such as Ofsted, the regulation and inspection framework for ECEC in the UK. What follows is an example of one story used to illustrate how the three separate aspects of head, heart and hand are identified and how the intersection of these elements has contributed to facets of professional identity. Participants have been given pseudonyms and their words are reported in italics.

The example explores one of the continuing challenges within ECEC, that of how practitioners are positioned and how they position themselves within the care and education divide (Taggart, 2015). Manning – Morton (2006) recognised a view in the workforce 'that getting close to children is not 'professional'' (p.48), this dilemma was explored by Helen through a story that specifically involved the emotional aspect of engaging with young children (heart). This had caused a tension for her with other staff who challenged the attachment she was making to a young child in her care. Her narrative explored how she negotiated this in her work with babies;

> *and so you always keep a bit of yourself back, but I can really help these*
> *children to feel safe and happy and nurtured… I'm very conscious of the fact*
> *that it is her needs not my need, you know and I think doing my foundation*

degree and all the other things I have done have given me the ability to reflect upon my actions cos it's very easy to think she cute, she's little, I want to cuddle her, but I cuddle her if she wants, it not for me, and I think it has given me that ability to look outside of myself and look at what I do …

some of my colleagues felt that I was giving this child too much attention and she was becoming too attached to me and that she needed to learn to be self-sufficient, my point was she is a nine months old baby, if she comes to me and puts her arms up she wants to be held, and it doesn't stop me from participating with the other children, but that's what I'm going to do because she needs to make an attachment to someone because it's difficult for her because she is not at home any more… (Helen)

I believe this example shows a practitioner skilfully and articulately negotiating the difficult task of providing loving care. In all my narratives this was the most fully expressed example of the idea of professional love (Page, 2011), the story told indicates the value of knowledge of attachment theory (head) being applied to values and beliefs (heart). The personal reflection following the challenge to her practice (hands) from another practitioner also indicated how she continued to believe in what she does despite contention, *'but if I believe it's right and what I've learned tells me it's right, I'll do it'* (Helen). This statement illustrates how this practitioner is demonstrating her professionalism, it's expressed when the three elements of belief, knowledge and practice come together, however even so in her working culture this view can be seen to create a tension for her, indicating there are still difficulties even within the workforce in recognising the appropriateness of professional love.
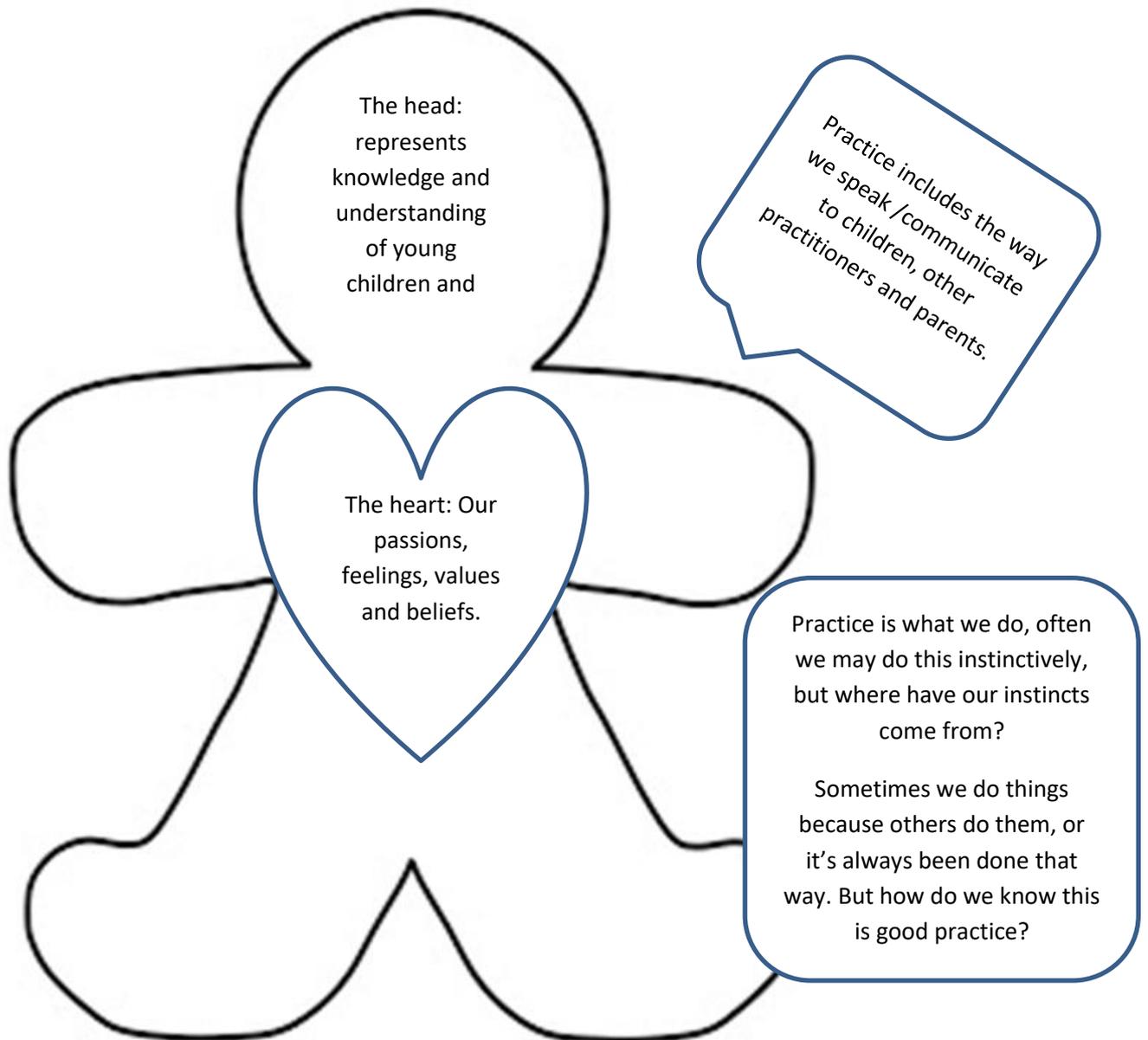
Conclusion

This article has suggested how the three aspects of head, heart and hands can provide insight into how practitioners have expressed ideas about their professionalism and professional identity and how these are not always fixed but oscillating identities (Stronach et al., 2003). The utilisation of the three aspects and their intersections as a means of exploring professional identity provided a way of exploring notions of professionalism in the workforce that are not constructed from external technical elements (Osgood, 2006) although they may show responses to them. The value of this model is the way it can be easily adopted and utilised within

the workforce as part of ongoing professional development and training, allowing both established practitioners and new trainees to examine, reflect on and conceptualise their own practice and professional identity and in doing so it is anticipated they will own their practice rather than merely perform a sense of professionalism.

 The model (Figure 1) has subsequently been utilised on a BA Early Childhood Studies Degree where students undertaking professional practice are given access to the visual prompt of the silhouette and encouraged to write reflectively in work based diaries that explore their thinking about all three elements. This provides a way of supporting them to not only integrate theory and practice but to provoke them to also access the emotional responses and value laden reactions that occur in work with young children (Taggart, 2015).

Figure 1: Head, heart and hands: model for professional reflection

The head: represents knowledge and understanding of young children and

Practice includes the way we speak /communicate to children, other practitioners and parents.

The heart: Our passions, feelings, values and beliefs.

Practice is what we do, often we may do this instinctively, but where have our instincts come from?

Sometimes we do things because others do them, or it's always been done that way. But how do we know this is good practice?

I argue that this approach allows the interrogations of professionalism in a way that is accessible to all, but one that is particularly resonant for ECEC due to its close alignment with the holistic ideas represented in pedagogical views of people like Pestalozzi (1746- 1827) and Steiner (1861-1925). I believe the visual nature of the tool can provide a way of supporting discussions and understandings about professionalism as part of ongoing research, initial training, such as on the BA Early Childhood Studies, and continuous professional development as a 'gestalt' approach (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000 p.68). In this way it supports the holistic nature of

reflection required to support excellence in pedagogic practice through a workforce that can be supported to negotiate and articulate their own professional identity.

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