Building professionality through a non-positional approach to early years educator leadership

An action-based study

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Below I present initial findings from my research about the professional development of 'early years educators', a term I use to refer to all those involved in the care and education of young children (0-5 years) in Early Years Foundation Stage settings in England. I begin with the background to the research and then explain the rationale for an action-based approach. I discuss ethical issues and the pragmatic data collection strategy. I outline some of the key emergent themes including professionality and role, non-positional leadership and the provision of support for continuing professional development.

Background to the research

This research was prompted by conversations with early years practitioners, teaching assistants, nursery nurses, early years teachers and primary school teachers in maintained and non-maintained settings whom I encountered through my work as a freelance consultant. Some seemed enthusiastic about recent policy innovations; keen to enrol on programmes that confer professional status or inspired by recent in-service training to make changes to classroom environments. Others appeared confused about the rate of change within the sector and what appear to be increasingly intensified working conditions. They described a range of feelings including disillusionment with their role, a sense of a loss of control over their daily practice and anxiety at a perceived downward pressure to prepare children for Key Stage 1. These differing experiences and emotional responses seemed to relate to their perceptions of themselves as educators of young children. I decided to explore the notion of professional identity and the ways in which it might be construed, negotiated, sustained and contested.

I reasoned that the conceptualisation of how educators acquire and use their identities has consequences for the kind of support needed from professional development opportunities. My premise was and remains that 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

In designing an intervention, I was able to draw on my experience as a member of the managing group of the HertsCam Network, a not-for-profit organisation providing programmes for teacher and school development (www.hertscam.org.uk). One of these is the Teacher Led Development Work programme in which there are school-based groups are facilitated by experienced teachers in the school concerned.

These facilitators use shared material, such as facsimiles, workshop guides and proformas, developed by the Network, to support a group of colleagues in the school to become then agents of change in their schools and creators of professional knowledge. Leadership capacity is realised through a development project whereby individual teachers identify a professional concern and then act strategically to address it. Projects also build organisational capacity by initiating and extending collaboration between colleagues that leads to further change and improvement (Frost, 2013). TLDW participants produce a portfolio of evidence of their development work. They also share the story of their development work in order to continue to build the knowledge store of what HertsCam teachers know. This sharing is supported through the holding of regular Network Events in the region, where all the TLDW participants, tutors and those undertaking the master's programme gather to present their stories in workshops and join in discussion groups. Stories are also shared on the HertsCam Network's website and through its regular publication of newsletters, journals and books.

The HertsCam Network approach develops Hoyle's (1975) concept of extended professionality arguing for:

> … an approach to teacher leadership, which does not assume that leadership is linked with positions in the organisational hierarchy of the school. Instead it recognises the potential of all teachers to exercise leadership as part of their role as a teacher. We believe that all teachers and education practitioners have some leadership capacity (Hill, 2014: 74).

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 fitted well with my own aims to develop and provide CPD opportunities for all EYEs which engage and develop their professionality in their workplaces. Stories and accounts demonstrating these acts of non-positional leadership and its transformational effects are well documented and plentiful (Frost, 2014) which offered me real optimism and encouragement for my proposed work with early years educators.

My proposal to bring together the first TLDW group composed of EYEs was approved by the HertsCam Network steering committee. The way in which participants understood such elements of leadership practices, and its impact on their view of themselves as professionals, is therefore of particular interest to the Network. However, a concern was that there had been a previous unsuccessful attempt to initiate TLDW programmes in primary settings. As a result it had been assumed within the Network that the TLDW non-positional approach to practice-development and knowledge-building would not relate to the practices in the early years sector and that language of TLDW, action planning, strategic intervention and teacher agency, was potentially challenging.

I was unconvinced of this. Buoyed by my experience of the sector and Zaslow's call for the expansion of

> ...more process-focused research that can inform effective professional development. The literature on early childhood professional development tends to focus on the content of professional development rather than the processes and strategies that can be used most effectively (Zaslow 2008:85)

I maintained that all educators, if they have access to supportive structures and strategies, can lead innovation, build professional knowledge, develop leadership capacity, influence colleagues and develop practice in their settings.

Conceptualising leadership in Early Years Education

A view of leadership as relational, collaborative and interdependent is emerging from within the early years sector (Siraj and Hallet 2014, Rodd 2013). This is not the version of educational-leadership which designates a small team of teachers as teacher-leaders within a school, an approach dominant in the USA and Australia (see Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Crowther *et al.,* 2002) and in the UK through its focus on positional leadership (see Naylor *et al.,* 2006). Instead, the Nutbrown Review (2012) views leadership as an inclusive activity which is the responsibility of all those working in children's centres, PVI settings and the EYFS in schools. In particular MacDowell Clark and Murray (2012) offer a paradigm of 'leadership within' which resonates with Hill's (2014) characterisation of 'non-positional leadership.' For them early years leadership is similarly 'non-hierarchical, flexible and responsive' and may 'emerge at any level of the organisation wherever the appropriate knowledge and expertise or initiative occurs and with the ability to act on challenges and opportunities' (MacDowell Clark and Murray, 2012:33). They explicate three features of 'leadership within:' *catalytic agency* defined as personal agency used to bring about change*, reflective integrity* an ongoing process in which practice is questioned and challenged in order to bring about improvement and *relational interdependence* which involves empowering and collaboration with colleagues. Both Hill's (2014) and MacDowell Clark and Murray's (2012) conceptualisations of leadership have the development of practice at their core, furthering the learning, development and wellbeing of children and young people. Both move the focus from formal leadership with its emphasis personhood and position to the promotion of leadership as a 'dimension of being human' (Hill, 2014: 74).

Methodology

The research is action-based. It explores educators' professionality whilst developing transformative CPD to support enhance this. My leadership of this action generates insights, knowledge and understanding about both the issue and the process.

A participatory approach was taken throughout the study. That is, I sought to mobilise and engage with the knowledge and experience of participants and to utilise information, reflections and systematic evaluations generated by them. The process was informed by

well-established traditions of participatory action learning and action research (Denis and Lehoux 2009: 367; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

In June 2015 I recruited 14 participants to the first early years multi-setting TLDW group. . A range of roles was represented: Early Years Practitioners (4), Early Years Teachers (2), Primary School teachers (2), Nursery School teachers (4), Pre-School leader (1) and Teaching Assistant (1). A similar range of settings was also represented: Maintained Nursey Schools (4), Maintained Primary Schools (4), Community Pre-Schools (1) and Children's Centre (1). The programme was hosted by a maintained Nursery School in Hertfordshire which has recently been awarded Teaching School status.

Since this is a doctoral study the consideration of ethical issues entails working with the tension between two contexts: that of the university and that of the workplace; balancing and protecting the interest of these two separate parties might present real challenges. Throughout the research process I have explored 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

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 would be any different.

Enabling and fostering capacity for leadership through the programme

The following section draws on data collected to illuminate the way in which a multi-setting teacher-led development work group can support the development of non-positional leadership. I made pragmatic choices about the types of evidence I documented and used to inform my research aims. Each of the examples below was produced over the course of the academic year (comprising 7 setting-based group twilight sessions) in which I guided the participants through a number of key steps to support them in leading projects to effect improvement. They are:

> Step 1 The EYEs reflect and clarify their professional values
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> Step 2 They identify a concern
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> Step 3 They negotiate with colleagues to explore that concern
>
> Step 4 They design and produce an action plan for a development project
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> Step 5 They negotiate with colleagues to refine the practicality of the project
>
> Step 6 EYEs lead projects that draw colleagues, children and their families into collaborative processes

And throughout the process EYEs contribute to knowledge building within the group, their setting and the wider Network (based on Hill, 2014).

Marie's project – an example of action arising from reflection

Within the HertsCam Network, teacher leadership is enacted through teacher-led development work. What is notable from the evidence is the central importance of passionate care as a driver for improving professional practice and the exercise of leadership. Here,

Marie an Early Years practitioner at a maintained Nursery relates how her observations of children at play bothered her. Using her knowledge of child development and drawing upon the knowledge she had gained previously from her art therapy degree she was able to hone her concerns to a manageable focus for development. The following vignette was produced to accompany Marie's portfolio.

Marie's project

Hidden language: developing the language of emotion through sensory exploration

I was concerned about children who were not aware of their own body space. They had not had sufficient sensory experience as babies and toddlers.
I asked myself – if the children did not have these early exploratory experiences, what changes would improve their learning and support their carers too?
I spoke to parents at their initial parent-teacher interview asking for their thoughts on sensory experiences. This began a dialogue on how they could together support their child's learning at home.

I questioned colleagues about their own experiences of sensory play. I led a process of change within our team. We developed new ways to support child initiated learning and embedded these in our routines of practice. It was evident that my project has enabled my colleagues to gain a greater awareness of the centrality of sensory experiences in children's language development and emotional growth.

Not only did Marie focus on an issue which mattered to her she was supported to collaborate with colleagues to plan and lead change processes, gather and interpret evidence of the impact of what they have done, and share their enhanced understanding with families. In so doing, she inspired colleagues to also work to change things for the better for the whole setting community. This is a fine example of what McDowall Clark and Murray (2012:82) would describe as 'diffused catalytic agency.' Her focus for development does not spring from nowhere. Its source is within the EYE herself and as noted by Moyles (2001) and Taggart (2011) this lies in a commitment to the welfare of young children and their families. The process of leadership grew and evolved from her emotional connection and observations of young children.

The following example demonstrates a tool used early on in the programme sessions to enable participants to plan strategically for leading change that is rooted in professional concerns.

Sally's project: Making it happen

In the HertsCam model, teacher leadership is conceptualised as the process whereby teachers

> clarify their values, develop their vision of improved practice and act strategically to set in motion processes in which colleagues are drawn into activities such as self-evaluation and innovation (Hill, 2014).

Enabling participants to appreciate that leadership is a strategic process is key. The second session of the programme particularly focussed on supporting EYEs to design a plan that addressed their professional concern. Each project plan is therefore personalised and relevant to a participant's context however EYEs were supported to envisage their projects as a time bound process that foregrounds leadership, collaboration and innovation. The photograph below is an example of Sally's project plan created at during the session.

Sally began her action plan by briefly outlining her initial concern about continuous provision in her setting on the large purple post it note on the far left of the image. The large orange post-it on the right of the image represents her ideal future state once she has addressed the concern and acted to shift practice in her setting. In order to move forward, the journey between these two points was then problematised. Various coloured notes demonstrate her ideas about various elements of the plan including key activities and tasks, materials, resources and financial implications. Crucially Sally was encourage to think about and incorporate into this plan opportunities to consult with her colleagues and discuss the viability, progress and gradual impact of the project on all those involved. These key points are allocated to specific points on the timeline. The plan was then used as a reflective tool.

Sally amended and annotated her journey over the course of the academic year demonstrating how the plan shifted and was improved as she sought to make a difference in her setting.

This approach is similar to Engestom's (2000) model of 'knot working' in which a group of colleagues collectively root out common causes of a shared concern in everyday practice. What is different here though is that Sally is planning how to lead a process of development rather than merely creating and manging the completion of a number of tasks. Consequently, participants are encouraged in the session to reflect on the context for change, questioning existing practice, considering obstacles and affordances that may arise and to share these observations with each other. This dialogue goes someway to addressing Starratt's (2007) challenge to create a model of professional development to build a community of learners 'engaged in a moral and intellectual understanding of who they are and what their relationships and responsibilities are to the natural, social and cultural worlds,' as they undertake leaderful activity.

Sally offered the following evaluation of this particular tool during a tutorial.

> *This enabled me to visualise the journey and helped me think about being strategic about what I wanted to accomplish. I have learnt how to breakdown a project into manageable sections - I thought about the possible challenge, the resources I might need, actions needed and ongoing impact. It helped me realise there were different parts to my project that needed attention. It helped us all to put into perspective the amount of work that would need to go into our project.*

Sally's developing understanding of leadership as a process is evident. Opportunities for participants to further critique their own leadership and that which they encounter within their own settings were built into the programme over the academic year as described next.

Valerie's project: widening conceptions of leadership

This section relates an activity used in the programme intended to encourage participants to explore the notion of non-positional leadership. This involved participants using a variety of materials in the creation of ephemeral collages to represent leadership in their settings and consider how the leadership of their own projects fitted within this representation.

Valerie's comments illustrate her perceived role in the leadership of her development work as she described what she had depicted in her collage. As a teaching assistant in a primary school foundation stage unit she particularly seemed to relish the opportunity afforded them to lead development especially when working collaboratively with others.

These are my teachers who I work with in my setting, the teachers and the TAs [teaching assistants], and they've all got their own ideas. They throw their ideas into the magical wind which moves up through this adventurous path and it gets here to me who mixes it all up and then has an explosion of an idea here and then it comes back down through my body here and it is whipped up into a circle, a bit like a wedding band, it never stops, and everything we have all thought comes together. Then I as the leader kind of do something with it.

Valerie later remarked on the usefulness of this activity noting it

…gave me an insight into myself, how I saw leadership, and now I've actually been questioning it in my setting…questioning what the meaning of leadership is. It also gave me an insight into how all the others in the group were handling leadership…

From being 'just a TA in a school' who was 'sent' on the programme, Valerie successfully envisaged and negotiated a new role for herself based on her interpretation of the 'atelierista' employed in Reggio nurseries. It would seem that for Valerie the programme and opportunities to engage in reflection and dialogue such as this have indeed been crucial in liberating her understanding of leadership 'away from the dominant normative discourses and enabled emancipatory change to occur' (Western, 2008:6).

Conclusion

The structure and ways of working of a teacher-led development work group are underpinned by a commitment to equity and parity and to a belief that leadership capacity is not limited to

those in named leadership positions (Hill, 2014). My research project based on widening participation to anyone who works in an early years context demonstrates this commitment to supporting leadership capacity which is a characteristic of human beings (Hill, 2014).

As explored in the contextual information above, numerous roles and a variety of settings were represented in the TLDW group. However, participants have frequently reported that despite these differences they have worked together effectively, supporting one another to address their various concerns. A discussion around participants' collages provoked an interesting comment on how this equity of value should be mirrored in settings.

> *I feel in an early years setting you go in and you shouldn't be able to tell one role from another because everybody is working together for the same end.*

My hope this that this programme continues to enable other EYEs to enact non-positional leadership and supports them to continue to make a difference to the lives of young children and their parents.

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