# What does it mean to be an early years practitioner: using an ecological framework to understand the development of identity and professional confidence?

## Introduction

Confidence in professional terms can be understood as representing agency and autonomy over practice, and is demonstrated by a workforce through their engagement in debates about purpose, policy and practice standards, and in the nature of their relationships with their service users, colleagues and regulators. This paper draws on findings from a larger, doctoral thesis on how graduate practitioners understand their professional role through their discussions of practice, and the agency they claim for themselves or are accorded by others. It begins by discussing how identity and agency are shaped, within a theoretical framework that considers the role of environment and interaction, and exploring how definitions of professionalism may be problematic for the early years workforce. Narrative data from 23 graduate practitioners demonstrating how they engage with their professional education and working environment, and how this influences how they see themselves is then considered. It concludes by addressing the question of how practitioners can be supported to develop confidence in their professional role and status, and to engage with the key debates that frame their practice.

## The development of identity

Identity can be defined as a dynamic and fluid aspect of self, which develops in response to environmental factors and the ways on which individuals chose to respond to these, ‘constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us…a subtle interweaving of many different threads’ (Burr, 2015, p.123. Bourdieu argues that this construction occurs within the context of restrictions and expectations afforded to the individual through the capital they accrue, drawn from factors including class, education, social expectation and wealth. The level of an individual’s compliance with these restrictions leads to the development of a habitus, a perception of self that can be argued to underpin the development of agency and confidence within their personal or professional identity. Colley’s work (Colley, et al, 2003; Colley, 2006) has demonstrated how this development of habitus accounts for the attitudes and dispositions that early years practitioners (predominantly young, working class and female) take into their practice, and their expectations of career progression, social approval for their role and economic reward. Identity, including confidence, therefore can be seen to derive from the social and cultural environment within which an individual is located, their relationships and interactions with others around them, and their response to the power relationships they encounter. Who one is can be regarded as a negotiation, informed by what one does, with whom, and with what autonomy and agency, but set within a context of powerful and constraining social expectations.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) argues that an individual’s environment (which could be argued to include social, cultural and professional environments) can be understood as a layered structure within which to understand oneself, and that it is the engagement and interaction of the individual with these layers that constitutes the social constructionist ‘interweaving’ and shapes what identity will be. This more active and agentic approach to understanding how individuals negotiate and develop their identity offers more scope for understanding how the agency and autonomy that underpin professional status and confidence can be developed, by presenting a framework within which to locate the key relationships of early years practice, and for examining the level and scope of power they offer practitioners.

To understand the professional identity of the early years practitioner, and the confidence with which this is articulated, it is necessary therefore to consider the nature of their engagement with their professional and social environments, the relational interactions within their practice, and their response to the power relationships within the early years sector. Such consideration begins with a discussion of what professionalism means and the challenges this presents for early years practitioners.

## Professionalism and early years practice

Taking a traditional approach to define professionalism, based on control of a specialist knowledge-base (Eraut, 1994), entry to the workforce (Evetts, 2003; Saks, 2012), and setting ethical codes and standards of practice (Kinos, 2008), is problematic for the early years workforce (Dyer, 2018). This is a workforce that lacks key elements of control over their sector, including the right to licence practice and to set standards, and a collective collective voice with which to articulate their views in discussions and debates about policy development or their specialist knowledge base (Hordern, 2016). Their position as a fragmented, low paid, working class, and only partially qualified workforce – only half the workforce needs to be qualified to NVQ Level 3 – reduces their symbolic capital, and thus power, with which to claim professional status and autonomy, in the face of government regulation and a neo-liberal, market-force discourse of the value and purpose of early years provision.

Definitions of professionalism based on empirical research about practitioners’ perceptions of themselves indicate a more relational interpretation of practice values and purpose, and the role of the individual practitioner. Professionalism within an early years context initially emphasised the ability of practitioners to reflect critically on their practice, and to work collegially, taking collective responsibility for the quality of their service and its impact on others (Oberhuemer, 2005; Dalli, 2008). More recently, early years professionalism has included autonomy and personal judgement, as well as specialist knowledge (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Brock, 2012). Relationship-building skills and communication remain highly valued, along with ethical values that include prioritising the individual needs of children (Dalli, 2008; Urban and Dalli, 2008; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010). However, when the fragmented nature of early years provision (Hordern, 2016; DfE, 2017a) is considered, such a values-based and relational, practice-centered approach to professionalism may be seen to come at some cost to the professional confidence and perceived status of the individual practitioner.

Murray (2013) cautions that over-reliance on personal values, located within the micro-system of practice, to inform professional identity risks undermining the ‘social legitimacy’ of this identity, so that identity becomes a statement of personal ethics rather than a more universal, shared standard of practice. Whilst the Statutory Welfare Requirements of the EYFS (DfE, 2017b) may appear to limit the agency of practitioners in determining how to practice, their universal application to all registered provision, and their role in licensing and quality assuring practice, from their situation in in the exo- and macro-systems of the early years sector, affords them a stronger public and legal jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988) for professional legitimacy. Where the agency of the practitioner might be more strongly asserted is in challenging and shaping such statutory documents, rather than in pursuing more personal understandings of practice.

Lumsden (2012) identified that the working conditions of the practitioner also undermine opportunities for developing professional confidence. As workers who spend the majority of their day working with young children, their opportunities for ‘professional socialisation’ are limited. Bourdieu (1998) argued that the closest relationships are formed with those with whom we have most frequent contact. For practitioners, this again represents the micro-system of practice, populated by young children, families and work colleagues, restricting their opportunities to model their professionalism on more experienced others, and to engage in the debates and discussions that most directly impact on their practice and their status. Murray (2006, 2017) also identified practitioner relationships as a factor that limits their engagement in developing the knowledge base of their practice. Although well-placed to contribute to small-scale projects which would develop an evidence base for early years practice, practitioners’ limited social capital may present barriers to establishing the relationships which would lend credibility to their findings or offer a means of disseminating these beyond their immediate settings.

Professional confidence is arguably demonstrated when individuals acquire the more assertive voices of procedural and constructed knowing (Johns, 2004), where knowledge, practice and values are critiqued together and challenged for their validity and appropriateness. Such a process within a small organisation requires a working environment open to this questioning, including a leadership that recognises the value of this over the risk to established hierarchies. It emanates from a transformative pedagogic approach to professional education where knowledge is understood to grow from challenging experience and judgement. It requires critical reflection, which will only be supported when leaders of practice are confident and secure in this process themselves. Across an occupational sector, it requires an infrastructure that brings organisations together as equals and promotes relationships that go beyond established hierarchies and discourses of completion.

There would appear then to be a number of tensions experienced by practitioners when considering their professional status, identity and confidence. Graduate level professional education should, with its increase in capital, have raised practitioners’ confidence, enabling them to renegotiate their professional status and their identity. However, the fragmented nature of the sector has meant communities of practice, arguably so powerful in developing an occupational knowledge base, remain restricted to the level of individual settings. Relationships that might support the articulation of the more confident and collective voice in key debates about practice and its purpose remain hard to develop. The vocational habitus (Colley et al, 2003) of the practitioner, to focus on the developmental needs of children, and to comply with regulatory requirements and social expectations may direct practitioners’ attention to their service users, rather than their own identity and status. These tensions raise the question of how do graduate practitioners see themselves and their role.

## Methodology

23 graduate practitioners, drawn from sector-endorsed Foundation degree and subsequent ‘top-up’ BA Hons programmes in Early Years, shared narratives of their professional experience through semi-structured interviews. Since all are women, many entering higher education with non-traditional entry qualifications (i.e. vocational qualifications at NVQ Level 3 in children’s learning and development rather than A levels), they can be considered to be typical of the early years workforce. That they have aspired to graduate level qualifications within a sector that offers no universal recognition for this commitment to professional development, and at a time when government discourse defined practitioners as lacking in skill and knowledge (Sims-Schouten and Strittrich-Lyons, 2013; McGillivray, 2008), could be argued to demonstrate a personal identity that acknowledges some confidence in their abilities as practitioners.

The narratives were analysed using the Listening Guide (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008), developed to draw out the individual voices of participants. This ensured that participants had autonomy over what they presented as data, and that their voices were respected and foregrounded in the analysis of findings. Since this research was intended to identify how practitioners perceive themselves in their engagement with the structures and relationships of their practice, it was especially important that any findings could be accepted as an authentic representation of their views, and a valid interpretation of their data. From my position as a professional educator for early years participants, this approach to data analysis has overcome issues of my own perceptions of practice and professionalism influencing the outcomes of the study. The Listening Guide requires the researcher to undertake up to three readings of their data including an examination of the ‘plots’ discussed by participants, the ownership they take of their stories, and the relationships they reference as well as how they discuss them. By overlaying the initial three readings, a more complete account of the narrated self can be identified, and the close attention paid to the content and the language of the narratives has meant that the data interpretation itself can be considered to be more trust-worthy.

## Findings

In analysing the data, key themes emerged, of identity and purpose, relationships and collegiality, and the value placed on specialist knowledge, reflecting the tensions faced by practitioners when defining their professionalism.

### Identity and purpose

They consider themselves to be both carers and educators, and see the two stands of practice as integrated and mutually supporting. However, when asked about priorities in their practice, they place care and the emotional security of the children first, arguing that this is what underpins successful learning and development. In explaining their practice, they reference the rights of young children to a safe and supportive environment in which to play and learn, taking on themselves the responsibility of providing children with positive relationships that value the individuality of each child, and respect their role as constructors of their own learning. They locate their identity therefore in the micro-system on their own settings and the children they currently work with.

### Relationships and collegiality

Much was said about relationships, team working and mutual respect within work teams by all participants, so that it became clear that collegiality again focused on the micro environment of practice, rather than more broadly across the sector. The relationships discussed in most detail were those formed with children, and those with their colleagues, reflecting definitions of early years professionalism that emphasised a shared responsibility for children’s well-being, and the need for strong interpersonal skills (for example, Oberhuemer, 2005; Dalli, 2008). There was some evidence of individual practitioners making connections with colleagues beyond their own organisations, most notably from child-minders who work in isolation, but there was little evidence of opportunity for the professional socialisation Lumsden (2012) argues is essential if a workforce is going to change its perceptions of itself. Relationships with OfSTED, setting managers or school governors (located in the more powerful environmental systems) suggest that practitioners position themselves as subordinate to these groups, complying with requirements rather negotiating or challenging them. Only 3 practitioners made any reference to other agencies, organisations or broader educational policy or other government agenda in their narratives. This apparent ambivalence towards other groups within the ECEC sector, and to wider political or social concerns is also seen in their attitude towards high-level qualifications and specialist knowledge.

### Constructing and valuing a knowledge base

There was clear evidence that these participants drew on their degree studies to inform their practice, and valued the additional understanding and criticality it gave them. However, personal disposition, identified in narratives as values, and interpersonal and communication skills, was privileged over academic or abstract knowledge, and over a higher level of qualification. The voice of their narratives (Johns, 2004), despite graduate level knowledge and understanding coupled with substantial work experience, is received and subjective knowing rather than the more confident procedural and connected knowing. This may reflect the limited opportunities for practitioners to form active partnerships with the academic researchers they perceive as the developers of their knowledge base. It echoes the findings of Sims-Schouten et al (2013) that when considering their professional identity, practitioners will separate out and value differently their understanding of their and research from the more practical aspects of their role in caring for and managing the behaviour and learning of young children.

## Conclusion

There are two problems to be addressed from this data – the isolation and lack of collectivity of the early years workforce; and their engagement with a specialist knowledge base and the social and political forces that impact on their practice. By using Bronfenbrenner’s framework to understand the environment of the early years practitioner (see Figure 1), it becomes clear that both stem from practitioners’ focus on the micro-system of practice within individual early years settings. Professional confidence will only grow with broader engagement with the powerful bodies located in the exo- and macro-systems of their environment, yet it requires confidence to initiate this engagement.



These practitioners regard care and respect for the children they work with as central to their practice and professional identity. However, by presenting this as an interpersonal and affective relationship and a personal value, it remains relegated to being a dispositional trait culturally associated with gendered early years practice, rather than a socially legitimate, shared ethical stance based on a critical understanding of developmental theory. Furthermore, since the relationships that practitioners spend their time on are all located within the micro-system of individual systems, this restricts their engagement with the social, cultural and political forces that impact on how they see themselves and how they are perceived. Overall, their confidence in their professional status is limited by their isolation from each other as a workforce, their limited relationships with more powerful voices within their sector (for example, academics writing about their knowledge base, regulators determining standards of practice) and their lack of opportunities for professional socialisation with more experienced occupational groups (for example teachers, professional educators), to support them in constructing and negotiating a new identity.

New opportunities for networking may begin to address this isolation. Social media platforms that support debate and the sharing of ideas and experience offer an opportunity for professional socialisation previously unavailable that tackles the issue of bringing practitioners together beyond their immediate workplace. However, this does not in itself develop the confidence of the practitioner either to articulate specialist knowledge or to build relationships with organisations and individuals they may regard as powerful authority figures. Access to graduate level education, and interaction with academic researchers plays a key role in supporting the development of their confidence and the renegotiation of their professional identity.

Graduate education that adopts a transformative pedagogy is required, in order to encourage the critical reflection and empirical research that enables individuals to challenge their views and values, to draw on both their experience and their specialist knowledge to justify their practice and professional identity, and to debate and critique the policies and regulations that frame their practice. Coupled with encouragement to see themselves as participating members of a research community, rather than visitors, this integration may, through collaborative research and membership of national rather than local organisations, bridge the divide between the practical and academic self (Sims-Schouten et al, 2013) of the practitioner. Scaffolding practitioners’ engagement with the policy and policy makers and regulators located in the exo- and macro-systems of the early years sector, through the use of a knowledge base rather than personal values, represents a stronger foundation for the further development of professional confidence, and thus agency. This then enables a renegotiation of their identity, not just as individuals who care and do, but also as professionals who care and know, and who are equal participants in debates about their purpose and their professional knowledge base.

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