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# 'I enjoy learning': Developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional learners

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**Abstract**

Emphasis on professionalisation of the childcare workforce internationally is associated with evidence that links education and experience of early years practitioners; quality of early education and care; and outcomes for children and families. In England, this has led to a proliferation of vocational undergraduate programmes. This article draws on research carried out with early years practitioners who were completing a sector endorsed foundation degree in early years programme that provided students in full-time employment with opportunities for professional and workplace learning. The students' views and experiences, documented in personal reflections and learning stories and voiced during focus groups, were complemented by those of early years managers and mentors. A critique of the findings to learn about developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional learners suggests that the students became confident, reflective professionals and learners who shared their learning and sought to implement change in their settings. This research has implications for developing early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners, new to academic study, as learners and as confident, reflective members of a professional workforce at a time of ongoing change and uncertainty in ECEC policy and practice nationally and internationally.

## Introduction

The research presented in this article is situated within a vocational undergraduate programme that provided early years practitioners in full-time employment with opportunities for professional and workplace learning. The article contributes to the literature on professional learning and development in the early years sector. It briefly establishes the context for the early years workforce before exploring some of the literature on professional and workplace learning and concepts of identity, particularly as these relate to early years practitioners. The article then describes the sector endorsed foundation degree in early years (SEFDEY) programme and the approach used to document eleven practitioners' accounts of their experience of participating in the programme together with the views of ten managers and eight mentors. The research findings are used to learn about developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional learners. The participants' accounts suggest that the SEFDEY students became confident, reflective professionals and learners who shared their learning and sought to implement change in their settings. These findings have implications for developing early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners, new to academic study, as professionals and as 'professional learners' at a time of ongoing change and uncertainty in ECEC policy and practice nationally and internationally (e.g. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014; Payler et al 2017).

## The early years context

### *The workforce*

Internationally, the role of members of the early years or ECEC workforce in supporting young children's development is increasingly acknowledged and valued (Campbell-Barr et al. 2015). This work is complex; informed by a variety of factors, including historical, political and cultural forces (Campbell-Barr et al. 2015). In many European countries the ECEC workforce comprises different types of professionals, sometimes with different sets of job title

in a single country; although these can be grouped into three main categories according to whether they have educational, care, or assistant/auxillary responsibilities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014). Supporting the professionalisation of members of the ECEC workforce and further increasing the prestige of the profession are among measures proposed to raise the quality of ECEC provision in Europe ([2011] OJ C175/8). The rationale for professionalisation of the workforce is derived from evidence from different sources including the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al. 2004), which showed that improving the quality of children's experience in early years settings is directly related to better outcomes for their learning and development. The qualifications and training of staff are important factors that contribute to the quality of this experience (Sylva et al. 2004). The association between staff qualifications and quality of childcare settings has been confirmed in a sample of Millennium Cohort Study children in England (Mathers et al. 2007) and in other studies highlighted by Nutbrown (2012) in her review of ECEC qualifications. Drawing on international comparisons between school or centre-based preschool (early childhood education) provision in 45 countries (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2009 school outcomes data, Pascal et al. (2013, p. 21) reported that 'The European data reveals a consistent association between the quality of preschool staff training and qualifications and later school performance'.

Qualification requirements for members of the early years workforce vary both within and between countries in terms of the level, course duration and content, and as a result of the type of setting and age of the child receiving care (Campbell-Barr et al. 2015). In European education systems, two qualification patterns predominate: a single qualification approach across the ECEC age group; and different approaches for those working with younger and older children (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014). Within countries, the single qualification pattern is usually associated with ECEC provision across the pre-school age range (unitary system) rather than in different settings for younger and older children (split system) with educational staff working with younger children in unitary systems tending to be more highly qualified than their counterparts working with younger children in split systems (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014). As well as using traditional approaches to qualification, some European countries offer alternative routes to some roles, such as employment based pathways and/or recognition of past experience, for example, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, England and Scotland (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014).

There are differences in ECEC policy and curricula across the four nations of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Boyd and Hirst 2016). In England, following on from publication of Every Child Matters, a national framework for local programmes of change (Department for Education and Skills 2004), the UK Government's childcare strategy (HM Treasury 2004) proposed radical reforms to the qualifications framework for the childcare workforce. Many of these reforms were intended to 'professionalise' and improve the status of those working with pre-school children (HM Treasury 2004). In 2006, the Children's Workforce Strategy set out a commitment to introduce the role of Early Years Professional status for practitioners who could meet a required 'standard of skill, knowledge and practice experience' (Department for Education and Skills 2006, p. 30). During the SEFDEY programme reported in this article the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) standards, launched in 2007, provided the basis for assessing and accrediting the EYPS award (Children's Workforce Development Council 2006). Early Years Professionals were seen to have an essential role in raising quality in early years settings; leading and improving

practice, supporting and collaborating with colleagues, and establishing good relationships with children and their families and carers (Children's Workforce Development Council 2006). EYPS was designed for professionals responsible for leading the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), from birth to age five (Teaching Agency 2012). Findings from a three-year study of the impact of EYPS suggested that it had enhanced the professional standing of early years practitioners (Hadfield et al. 2012). The standards were subsequently revised (Teaching Agency 2012) and in 2013, the EYPS programme was replaced by Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) (Department for Education 2017).

## *Professional and workplace learning*

Mitchell et al. (2010, p. 536) use the term 'professional learning', within the school setting, to describe both formal opportunities for learning and 'more informal processes of teachers' learning associated with thinking about and reflecting on aspects of their practice'. Previously, Pedder et al. (2005, p. 209) had suggested that professional learning is 'the transfer of new or advanced skills, pedagogy, content, and resources into one's personal practice through reflection'. Professional learning can be thought of as participative and engaging the whole person and so promoting agency, self-efficacy and autonomy. It is seen as a way of enhancing an individual's personal and professional capacity for work-related activity rather than solely fulfilling the needs of the workplace. In addition, Eraut (1994, p. 21) argues that professional learning should not just enhance the knowledge creation capacity of individuals and professional communities, but should prepare them for future learning and challenges by offering them the opportunity to 'escape from their experiences in the sense of challenging traditional assumptions and acquiring new perspectives'. There is typically emphasis on the whole person encompassing values and ethics, personal skills, awareness of wider issues and preparation for the unexpected and taking responsibility for developing the practice and research of the professional area. A wealth of research has shown that lasting and effective professional learning is participative and that knowledge is co-constructed (e.g. Boud et al. 2001, Gravani 2007).

## *Identities as professionals and as professional learners*

Evidence for the link between the education and experience of early years practitioners, the quality of early education and care and ultimately the outcomes for children and their families (e.g. Sylva et al. 2004, Mathers et al. 2007) raised questions about appropriate knowledge, skills and competence requirements for members of the ECEC workforce. 'The Study on competence requirements in early childhood education and care (CoRe)' was established to examine 'conceptualisations of 'competence' and professionalism in early childhood practice' and related issues across Europe (CoRe 2011, p. 7). The researchers noted potential benefits that might arise from allowing some 'space' for professional identity to emerge:

> It appears to be beneficial for clarity, continuity and professional identity where countries or regions have clear competence profiles for both the profession and training … The downside of continuity, however, may be lack of innovation. Clarity may result in over-technical specifications, leaving little room for reflexivity, and a clearly defined professional identity may lead to a closing of the profession to influences from outside. Developing broad (rather generic) competence profiles that leave enough room for local interpretations and adaptations appears to be a viable option for dealing with these dilemmas. (CoRe 2011, p. 53 italics in original)

The concept of 'identity' has been variously defined and described. Spillane, for example, in his exploration of teaching, suggested that:

> By identity I mean an individual's way of understanding and being in the world, in this case the world of work. Although identity includes what one knows and believes, it also encompasses dispositions, interests, sense of efficacy, locus of control, and orientations toward work and change. (Spillane 2000, p. 308)

For Wenger (1998, p. 151) an identity is constructed through engaging with others who are members of a community; 'learning ... implies becoming a different person [and] involves the construction of identity' in a reciprocal, iterative, on-going learning process. This process is both individual and social. In their exploration of the concept of professional identity relating to early years educators in England, Lightfoot and Frost (2015, p. 402) acknowledge that 'changes in professional identity are linked to the concept of human agency'. Agency it was suggested earlier is promoted through professional learning.

McGillivray (2008) suggested that the range of titles used for early years practitioners might have contributed to uncertainty about identity, and there were several explorations of the meaning of 'professional identity' and 'professionalism' for this workforce following the launch of the EYPS (e.g. McGillivray 2008, Simpson 2010, Murray 2013). Brock's (2013) research of early years educators' views of professionalism spanned different policy initiatives in England, with the second phase taking place in 2006/7. Drawing on participants' professional knowledge to develop a model of professionalism, Brock (2013 p. 34) refined three generic themes ('professionalism, working relationships and curriculum and pedagogy') to derive 'seven overarching dimensions of professionalism … knowledge; qualifications, training and professional development; skills; autonomy; values; ethics; and rewards'. Similar studies were carried out in other policy settings and Brock's (2013) initial overarching themes have commonalities with those reported by Dalli (2008) following a national survey of early childhood teachers in New Zealand.

A professional is usually expected to have a large specialist body of knowledge about their work role gained from extensive formal, academic study and training (Quinn et al. 1996, Blauch 1955); this is seen as a defining feature of professional identity. Eraut (2000a) defined two types of knowledge in professional work. One is codified knowledge, or 'public knowledge or propositional knowledge' (Eraut 2000a p. 113-114). The other, called 'personal knowledge' is developed by a professional over a period of time and is 'highly situated and individualistic' (Eraut, 2000b, p. 28). For Eraut (1994), non-professional education is concerned with ensuring learners can repeat and apply their knowledge whereas professional learning requires associative and interpretative use of knowledge because it 'involves something more ... 'judgment' ' (p. 49).

Three of Brock's (2013) seven dimensions (knowledge, skills and values) overlap with categories previously reported by Egan (2004) who used students' responses to different writing frames to identify categories which characterised their view of professional identity. Egan (2004, p. 25) invited teacher education students specialising in early years education to complete the following sentences: 'I will be a good early years professional because …' and 'In order to become a good early years professional I need …'. Egan (2004) analysed the responses and derived six main categories from the data: personal attribute, personal interest or satisfaction, 'theoretical' and professional knowledge, professional skills and values. Egan (2004) observed that more students reported that they wanted to develop confidence that any other attribute, and Osgood (2010) noted that professional confidence featured highly in nursery workers' constructions of professionalism. Bleach (2014, p. 195) reported that ECEC

practitioners' 'sense of identity as professionals increased and they acquired not only the knowledge and language, but also the confidence, to interact with others in a professional way' through taking part in a continuing professional development programme involving reflective practice and action research. In this article, Egan's (2004) categories provide a useful framework for critiquing and discussing the students' developing identities as professionals, as a precursor to exploring their developing identities as professional learners.

**The SEFDEY programme**

The SEFDEY programme was situated within a London local authority (local government area) and the School of Education, University of Hertfordshire, UK. The programme was co-designed by University and local authority staff to help the local authority meet the national policy target for all full daycare settings to be graduate-led by 2015 (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007). Starting in 2010, this two-year vocational programme was developed for undergraduate students in full-time employment in government-maintained, private, voluntary and independent sector childcare and education settings. Thirty-nine students enrolled across two cohorts starting a year apart. The students included practitioners from different settings within the borough, an area of deprivation (Greater London Authority Intelligence 2016). Taught sessions were held at the local Staff Development Centre on Fridays and Saturdays, facilitating attendance for employed participants who experienced difficulty attending day-time courses and travelling to the University site.

The 'sector endorsed' nature of the programme confirmed that it was based on relevant UK standards (Ingleby and Hedges 2012). The programme included work-related learning and assessment and study skills, and students developed employment, practical and core professional skills including communication, problem solving, decision making and child protection. Each student had a workplace mentor who understood the context and might have known some of the children in the setting.

The SEFDEY programme incorporated a constructivist approach to learning. Using only a transmission model of learning to be a professional may not be sufficient if professionalism involves working in a way that requires autonomy, agency and self-efficacy in applying existing knowledge, skills and understanding to unknown situations. The programme modules were as follows: personal and professional skills for the early years practitioner; starting with the child/advanced child development; fulfilling legal and professional responsibilities; leadership and management in children's workforce settings; professional diversity and common goals; and curriculum frameworks. There were also two workplace modules. For one of these modules, students collaborated with their work colleagues to identify a small change for their setting. With the support of their tutor they completed research to justify this change and explored how they might implement it.

**Research approach**

*Method and aims*

Multi-method, qualitative evaluation research was conducted to explore perceptions of the impact, seen as 'the demonstrable contribution' (RCUK 2017, bold in original) of the SEFDEY programme from different perspectives. The research was managed by the University SEFDEY programme lead (research lead); the local authority training officer; and two University research fellows (researchers) who were independent of programme

development and management. Ethical approval was obtained through the relevant University ethics committee and participants provided written consent.

Drawing on the findings this article addresses the following research question:

- What can we learn about developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional learners?

*Participants and data collection*

The data collection approaches and participants are shown in Table 1. Purposive sampling was used to identify a range of student practitioners who were invited to take part in the research. Eleven contributed; all female, eight from black and minority ethnic groups, representative of the cohorts, and with an approximate age range from twenties to late fifties. Their roles included childminder, nursery practitioner, nursery nurse and learning support assistant and they worked within settings such as Children's Centres, a primary school, a nursery school and their own home. Both student cohorts were represented; some participants were nearing the end of the first year and others were close to completion of the programme.

Each student participant's workplace manager and their mentor were also invited to contribute to the research. There were three main aspects of the mentor role: to support the student on the programme; to facilitate the work-based part of the module; and to verify evidence provided by the student to demonstrate the professional practice element of the degree. This involved the mentor meeting regularly with the student, observing them working with children, providing feedback following observations and monitoring the student's progress.

**Table 1        Research approach and participants**

| Approach<br>Questions/question areas | Participants |
|---|---|
| *Phase 1* | |
| **Learning stories**<br>– Describe one key moment where you feel you have been able to put the learning of this programme into practice in working with a child…<br>– Describe how this programme has developed you personally…<br>– Describe a particularly challenging element of this programme for you. What challenged you, and how did you respond to this challenge? | – 11 students<br>– 10 managers<br>– 8 mentors<br>– Other participants included a community worker, a family support worker, an advisory teacher and a friend. |
| **Personal reflections**<br>– Can you tell us about what you see as the key strengths of this programme…<br>– Can you tell us about anything that has made completing this course difficult for you… | – 11 students |

| | |
|---|---|
| – Additional optional learning story<br><br>– Describe a particularly challenging element of this programme for you. What challenged you, and how did you respond to this challenge? | |
| *Phase 2* | |
| **Focus groups**<br><br>– Exploring the flexible delivery model<br><br>– Impact on professional identity<br><br>– Impact on learning | – 10 students in two focus groups (7 in group 1 and 3 in group 2) |

The questions and question areas were open-ended leading to qualitative data. This emphasised the views and experiences of the participants (Pope and Mays 1995) and the perspective of each individual (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The three data collection approaches were as follows:

*Learning stories.* Students completed 'learning stories' (Carr 2001) comprising personal narratives detailing their learning during their study. Traditionally, this approach is used to capture young children's learning experiences in a subjective way by emphasising the learning process over the 'content' of the experience. Storytelling is one of several data collection approaches used in educational studies where narrative is increasingly used as both the type of experience studied and the method of inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). An individual's professional identity is closely associated with story and storytelling. McAdams (2003), for example, refers to identity as a developing life story and Wojecki (2007, p. 172), drawing from the work of Ricouer (1986) suggested that 'storytelling is the medium through which self-presentation (or identity) is constructed and maintained'. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) 'teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories' and here, the learning stories approach provided a way of recording the experiences of adult learners new to academic study, enabling them to articulate and make sense of their learning and development to themselves and others.

The research lead sent a learning story proforma via email to each student participant. Once they had completed their learning story, the student documented a reflection on their narrative before returning the completed proforma to the research lead. The research lead then forwarded the completed proforma to the student's manager and mentor so that they could add their reflections. This process enabled exploration of each learner's progress from different perspectives. The mentor perspective provided an external view on student progress and potential impact of programme delivery. Using the tools and values of an area of practice in this way aligned with Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho's (2006) concept of 'pedagogical isomorphism'.

*Personal reflections.* The students' reflections, also obtained by email, were shared only with research team members, not with their manager and mentor. These personal reflections provided data to contextualise and interpret the co-constructed learning stories.

*Focus groups.* Additional data were collected when ten students attended focus group sessions with the researchers. These sessions were used to explore the content in the learning

stories and the impact of aspects of flexible delivery of the SEFDEY programme: community-based provision; collaborative delivery and support with local authority partners; interprofessional access; and non-traditional timing.

### Data management and analysis

The learning stories and personal reflections were submitted electronically and findings from the focus groups were transcribed from session recordings and contemporaneous notes. These qualitative data were content analysed (e.g. Patton 2002, Schreir 2012). As part of the process of analysis, the students' learning stories, including the reflections of their managers, mentors and other contributors, were searched electronically for selected key words (Ryan and Bernard 2003), including 'professional', 'learner' and related terms (Tables 2 and 4) and characteristics identified from the categories derived by Egan (2004) (Table 3). The themes emerged from the data and also, for professional identity, from Egan's (2004) categories; views of professional identity put forward by teacher education students specialising in early years education. Selected categories, and related characteristics, that were aligned with the data collected in this research (a personal attribute, confidence; a professional skill, reflection; and knowledge and understanding) (Egan 2004) were used to enable discussion of identity development. Thus the themes were identified using elements of induction and deduction (Patton 2002). Findings presented in the next section are 'information-rich' examples selected using 'purposeful sampling' (Patton 2002, p. 46) to enable a critique of issues relevant to developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional learners. They are presented with minimal editing as verbatim quotations 'as the matter of enquiry; as evidence; as explanation; as illustration; to deepen understanding; to give participants a voice, and to enhance readability' (Corden and Sainsbury 2006, p. 11). Pseudonyms have been assigned to the learning stories; extracts from the personal reflections and focus group sessions are presented anonymously. Whilst this paper focuses mainly on the students' voices, the perspectives of other participants provide some triangulation and contribute to the validity of the findings (Patton 2002).

### Findings and discussion

### Engaging in a professional and workplace learning programme

One of the challenges that early years practitioners experience in attending formal training programmes is the mismatch between working full-time and studying part-time (Osgood 2010). Focus group participants suggested that the design of the SEFDEY programme had contributed to enabling students to study; as one explained 'Lots of people would not have been able to access the course in any other way'. Holding sessions locally in a familiar setting and the timing of the sessions helped students to integrate attendance and work commitments. Financial support provided by the local authority was valued although four of the students referred to the financial implications of taking time from work or needing to purchase study resources. Difficulties associated with balancing work and study are enhanced when programme content is not seen as relevant in the professional setting (Osgood 2010). This was mitigated here by including work-related learning within the course, so that the workplace provided a focus for learning. This aspect was highlighted by one student who noted that 'studying on the course and working in the setting complemented each other'. Nevertheless, six students commented on difficulties with finding time to study within an already busy schedule ('balancing time between work, study and family life has proven very challenging').

One participant acknowledged the difficulty of 'taking on a role as an independent student', which differed from her previous experience in college and drew attention to her history as a learner.

### *Developing identities as professionals*

#### *Developing the professional self*

Drawing on Spillane's (2000, p. 308) view of identity as 'an individual's way of understanding and being in the world' it is to be expected that the students' identities would change during the programme. In identifying and critiquing evidence for change, this section focuses initially on the students' use of the word 'professional' and related terms in their learning stories (Table 2). These references to 'professional' encompass the way they felt and behaved as well as their view of themselves; the role of 'self-perception' emphasised by Bucher and Stelling (1977).

**Table 2   Learning stories: examples of students' use of 'professional' and related terms**

| **Professional(s), professionally** |
|---|
| – The programme has provided me with the confidence to gain a professional recognition for my role as a child minder *(Rachel)* |
| – My development since starting the programme has been magnificent, I have improved both personally and professionally, and I have grown in confidence and I think I have a much better working life *(Jane)* |
| – Not only was I able to talk confidently about accurate legislation and policies, but I was able to have a professional conversation when I was not worrying about remembering things I 'should' know *(Maureen)* |

Murray (2013, p. 531) reflects that tensions might arise:

> ... between self-image as a professional and the expectations of others, with self-image providing personal agency and the external expectations providing structural norms. If the external components are overly dominant there is a danger of undermining personal agency and professional efficacy.

The following excerpt from the transcript of the focus group suggests such tensions. It provides one childminder's perception of the way her professional identity was influenced by the expectations of others and how this changed through taking part in the programme:

> I think I have been through a massive transformation actually. I was disillusioned with what I was doing ... I was forever being asked what do you do for a living? Oh I am just a childminder, it was *just* a childminder ... we were considered to be so unprofessional compared to say nursery workers ... but I constantly felt I was being put back in a box ... also the expectations of the parents ... development officers, it was always that we were here and everyone was here ... I *knew* I was doing a good job, I had an outstanding Ofsted, I knew I was doing well but I didn't *feel* very professional, I didn't feel that anyone considered me to be a professional or anything ... so that is why I decided to change ... since doing the course it has completely rejuvenated the reasons why I loved doing the job in the first place. I bought a new place, I have expanded, I have employed

> three more people ... it has totally changed ... I am staying in doing what I am doing ... it has given me that confidence ... I don't say I am *just* a childminder now ... I now say I am an *'early years professional'... (SEFDEY participant - focus group)*

This student did not '*feel* very professional', despite receiving an external endorsement from Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, an independent inspection and regulatory organisation in England. Her discourse suggests that whereas external elements were more dominant at the start of the programme, by the end there was a balancing of 'External and internal components of professional identity', necessary 'because a professional role needs social legitimacy for recognition and influence' (Murray 2013, p. 531). Elements of uncertainty relating to feelings of professionalism might, in part, reflect the increasing professionalisation of the early years workforce explored by McGillivray (2008) as practitioners in different roles engage with their emergence as professionals. This student suggests that her perception of herself as a professional had changed through taking part in the programme. She described this as 'a massive transformation', linked to developing confidence and rekindling of her original love for the role, which had already resulted in changes in practice. The 'knowing' ('I was doing a good job') present prior to the programme, extended to 'feeling' professional, illustrated in a new personal description, as an *'early years professional'* rather than '*just* a childminder'.

Whilst this childminder's account during the focus group session alludes to aspects of 'the professional self' proposed by Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1993, p. 8), including 'the self image, the self esteem, the job motivation', in the next extract, Cathy refers to another dimension: 'the future perspective'.

> Being on this programme has helped me to see my potential as a childcare practitioner. Personally it has enabled me [to] see me going further in accomplishing things. That will further enhance me in becoming the kind of childcare professional I would like to be. I have developed personally on this programme in many ways. The way that I interact with children that I work with, and their parents ... I now feel within myself that I have the confidence both as a mother and a professional to [be] more assertive when speaking to others. It has enabled me to see me as a professional, see my capabilities. *(Cathy - learning story narrative)*

Cathy reports that taking part in the programme had enabled her to see herself 'as a professional'; and also acknowledges an impact on her role as a mother. Whilst describing the impact of the programme to date, Cathy suggests she is on a journey towards 'the kind of childcare professional I would like to be'. This implies personal agency, a freedom to choose the nature of her professional identity rather than to adopt an externally imposed model. She is still journeying, not a completed product, alluding to an ongoing process that accords with Murray's (2013) finding from her work with EYPS candidates.


*Developing professional characteristics*

This section explores the nature of the changes in students' identities as professionals using references to selected characteristics identified from the categories derived by Egan (2004): confidence (a personal attribute); reflection (a professional skill); and knowledge and understanding (Table 3).

Confidence was referred to in all eleven students' learning stories or in the associated reflections, either the students' reflections or those of other participants. Cathy's reference to increasing confidence in her learning story narrative presented in the previous section was

echoed by several of her peers, illustrated in Table 3. This emphasis on confidence is not surprising and has been noted in other studies involving early years practitioners (e.g. Egan 2004, Osgood 2010, Bleach 2014). Eraut (2004, p. 269, original emphasis) discussed the 'importance of *confidence*' and the complexity of its relationship with other factors in workplace learning. Jemma's response (Table 3) implies a sequential process, starting with the course, which is suggestive of the 'triangular relationship between confidence, challenge and support' (Eraut et al. 2000, p. 251). Jemma's reference to finding solutions indicates a successful outcome, which can lead to what Eraut et al. (2000) see as a circle of development; in turn resulting in support for others in the work setting. A similar pattern might be drawn from Maureen's assertion (Table 3) that she is confident to speak out. She is drawing on her knowledge of theory and willing to implement change in the workplace.

**Table 3    Learning stories: examples of students' references to selected characteristics**

| |
|---|
| *Characteristic: Confidence, self-confidence, confident, confidently* |
| – I personally feel that this course has developed my confidence in my abilities to take on challenges to find the solutions *(Jemma)* <br> – On a personal level even though I am only half way through the training it has made me confident in all aspects of my life *(Jane)* <br> – I have become more confident voicing my ideas, backing it up with theory and implementing my ideas in my setting *(Maureen)* <br> – I feel and act like a professional, which has enhanced my self-confidence and self esteem *(Rachel)* |
| *Characteristic: Reflect, reflective, reflecting, reflection* |
| – The knowledge and experience I have gained have increased my skill base and provided me with the confidence to become a far more reflective practitioner *(Rachel)* <br> – I realise that I reflect more on things I do within the setting and try to link it to theory and theorist *(Lisa)* <br> – This has enabled me to be a reflective person, I am more confident in observing, assessing and including children in the planning of activity as it is their learning *(Abie)* <br> – I develop good practice with action in areas such as reading to find out more, reflecting on my practice, communicating my ideas, developing and strengthening my ICT skills and seeking the views of others *(Christina)* |
| *Characteristics: Knowledge and understanding, understand, understood* |
| – Gaining new skills and knowledge was very enjoyable for me especially when I saw myself using them *(Afareen)* <br> – I have gained knowledge, understanding and maturity in what I do *(Maureen)* <br> – I have developed my understanding of how an enabling environment and providing high quality resources does make a positive contribution in children's learning and development *(Amala)* <br> – My understanding on child development has gone one level up, as my priority is to see the children learn and develop in an environment which is focused on meeting their individual needs *(Lisa)* |

Critical reflection, reviewing personal practice and inquiry into the underpinning assumptions (Brookfield 1998), is a rigorous, systematic process or tool used to transform experience into experience-based theory (Rodgers 2002). The process of reflection requires generic skills as well as context specific skills, knowledge and understanding (Dyer and Taylor 2012) and the emphasis on engaging in reflection during the programme is apparent from the responses (Table 3). However, whilst in Dyer and Taylor's (2012) study undergraduate early years students seemed to struggle with evaluating their own practice, believing that they should be measured against external standards of good practice, this was not apparent in the following extract. This extract suggests evidence of this student's confidence in her own judgement, in this case corroborated by her mentor who refers to her mentee's reflection on her own practice and the practice of others.

> The programme of research and practical assignments has allowed Lisa to develop a better understanding of child development and pedagogy. This perception and knowledge has then been applied to her setting through her reflecting on her own practice and that of her staff, and then her implementing small changes to the setting which have been decisive. *(Lisa's mentor)*

Equipping practitioners with opportunities to engage in and hone their reflective skills during early years programmes provides them with a mechanism for the ongoing creation of work-related knowledge. Such 'professional knowledge developed through effective reflective practice' provides a way of viewing the practice context (Loughran 2002, p. 40). Knowledge and understanding featured in many of the participants' responses (Table 3 and the following extracts). However, it is not clear whether these references are to 'given' knowledge provided through the programme; to the practical or work-related knowledge that Minott (2010) infers is built through inquiry and practising self-assessment; or to both forms of knowledge. Certainly, the assertion that Amala's 'knowledge of EY theories is more embedded in her practice' could imply the complex process that Eraut (2004) suggested is involved in transferring knowledge from educational settings into the workplace.

> Basically, you have to have the knowledge to come across as a very good practitioner who is able to understand the needs of the parent and the child and to enable you to work alongside the parent, to advise them and support them and move yourself forward. You do not want to be stuck in a rut. Being on this course, it is like a flower, it is blooming ... you just open up and gaining so much knowledge, you are like a sponge just taking everything in and you are actually passing that knowledge on to the parents. *(SEFDEY participant - focus group)*

> Looking back now, I think the course has really helped to provide a focus during a very difficult period and has provided you with the knowledge and understanding to be a much stronger practitioner with a clearer vision of what you can achieve. *(Jane's mentor)*

> An early years advisor who had worked with Amala previously commented how positive an impact the course has had on Amala's EY practice & how her knowledge of EY theories is more embedded in her practice. *(Amala's manager)*

### Developing identities as professional learners

During the programme each student had unique opportunities for professional learning with a 'community of colleagues' (Shagrir 2010, p. 56): their peers, mentors, managers, colleagues and programme organisers (the tutors and training organiser). The perceived value of informal experiences involving collaboration such as networking and study groups was noted by

Bickmore (2012) in a study of administrators' professional learning experiences. Here, too the students on the SEFDEY programme particularly valued their support network. This network included the programme organisers as well as the study group comprising programme participants, which was seen by one student as 'a key strength, for it has given someone like me a voice'. Some students also recognised the contribution made by managers, mentors and colleagues. The opportunity to interact with their peers, child care professionals from other settings, enabled students to learn from each other and to develop a network of friends as they worked alongside others and discussed and shared ideas and experiences. Conversations in the professional setting can provide valuable opportunities for professional learning (Haigh 2005). Through such conversations 'individuals come to know themselves and others, to know what they know and to construct professional identities' (Beattie 2000, p. 4).

Murray (2013) reports that EYPS undergraduates saw their learning as an ongoing developmental process and also as a feature of a professional. In the following story Jane too considers her development as a learner, suggesting that she has developed practices that will support her in the future.

> ... as the course progresses I have begun to gain confidence in myself. I became more familiar with the art of reflection to be able to analyse every aspect of my life; and start to formulate strategies that would help me with where I want to go. Personally, I have learnt a lot about myself and the kind of learner that I am, I have developed a study skill base to support my personal development and learning, began to plan and organise my time better, I have a better working relationship with the team. I have learnt that being a reflective practitioner is vital, as it provides a vehicle for knowledge and it helps me to think about the way I work. I have learnt to accept and welcome feedback as part of my development. I have developed my intra personal skills and people skills. I feel that I now have a pedagogical approach into young children's learning; I can interpret the learning, that is taking place finding ways to support the learning. Without this programme I think I would not be able to understand the importance of how to interpret the children's play. Finally although I only completed my first year of the programme, I have become a more confident person and a much better practitioner, I feel I am gaining personal as well as, professional satisfaction and if everything goes well I hope to complete the full honours degree … *(Jane - learning story)*

Jane's insights suggest what Bruner (1985, p. 8) emphasised as the importance to the learner of 'learning how to go about learning'. Her story implies that she is engaging in professional learning, using reflection to develop her practice (Pedder et al. 2005) in what might be seen as transformative ways. Jane's recognition of herself as a learner is juxtaposed with references to children's learning. Her narrative, together with extracts in Table 4, suggests students felt they had greater understanding of how to support children's learning and development. Colleagues and friends acknowledged SEFDEY students' development as learners ('Lisa has become a confident independent learner' - *Lisa's manager*) and reflected on the way this had influenced others ('I have noted a positive impact on some staff members & Afareen's ability to study and work full-time has inspired others to develop their learning' - *Afareen's manager*).

This emphasis on learning is not surprising; it is the nature of the learning that is of interest. Participation in the SEFDEY programme positioned and named the practitioners as 'learners', which Boud and Solomon (2003) have suggested is complex. It raises 'issues related to position, recognition and power', particularly in the workplace context, which represents the 'dispersal of learning' (Boud and Solomon 2003, p. 326-327) from more conventional classroom settings. The way the students use the word 'learner' and related terms in their responses and the affirmative language used to describe the students as learners (Table 4 and

Jane's learning story) might in part derive from this positioning and from the framing of the questions (Table 1). There is no sense as Boud and Solomon (2003, p. 330) reported in their study of workgroups 'that to name oneself as a learner suggests incompetence or lack of expertise in performing one's tasks'; rather it can be 'understood as someone engaged in learning or showing willingness to know more', a process 'seen as adding value to one's work'. This type of learning, professional learning, provides a way of enhancing an individual's personal and professional capacity for work-related activity rather than solely fulfilling the needs of the work setting.

**Table 4    Learning stories: examples of students' use of 'learner' and related terms**

| Learn, learned, learning, learnt |
|---|
| *Participant's learning* |
| –   I also share my learning with colleagues and others *(Lisa)* |
| –   I enjoy learning as well as empowering others through my knowledge *(Christina)* |
| –   By observing children, l have learnt to develop well-planned activities based on children's interests, age and stage of development *(Abie)* |
| *Children's learning* |
| –   I am now aware of many aspects of child development and how to support development and learning *(Rachel)* |
| –   I found having to think about how I could move the children's learning forward made me think about theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky *(Jemma)* |
| –   I share my observation findings with parents and we both extend their learning experience by concentrating on areas that need more focus and attention in their development process *(Abie)* |

### *Learning about developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional learners*

Using learning stories as a way of eliciting feedback enabled others within the students' work setting to provide their perspectives and allows some triangulation. Although contextualised within the SEFDEY programme, the depth and richness of the responses means that they contribute to national and international research on early years practitioners' personal and professional development. Such research is important for understanding the complexity of the nature of the roles, identity development and learning requirements of practitioners working in early years settings, many of whom are new to academic study. This article has explored evidence relating to these early years practitioners' development as professionals and suggested that they engaged in professional learning. This apparent 'separation' of the professional and their learning could belie their intertwined and interdependent nature; engaging in professional learning contributes to the further development of the professional self. Many of these students were new to academic study and although some did report challenges with their studies, the findings suggest that as Wojecki (2007, p. 169) reflected the educators used learning and teaching approaches that provided opportunities for them 'to re-author their identities to learning'.

Although the students entering the SEFDEY programme were all early years *professionals*, one student explained that she did not '*feel* very professional' at the start of the programme. She alluded to a perceived gradation of 'professionals' within the early years workforce, describing herself as '*just* a childminder' where childminders were 'considered to be so unprofessional compared to say nursery workers'. Developing confidence through taking part in the programme contributed to a personal perception of 'being' a professional, countermanding aspects of external influence in a way that official external approbation, 'an outstanding Ofsted' had not. This student's acknowledgement that external influences had provided the reason she 'decided to change' imply agency, which as Billett (2001) suggested, is an important requirement for taking up workplace learning opportunities. Such professional learning, in turn, develops agency (Day and Gu 2007). Describing her experience as 'a massive transformation', this students' contribution raises questions about whether this transformation resulted in what Waters and Payler (2015, p. 163) describe as 'systematic, sustainable and transformative change', their envisioned outcome of professional learning opportunities within ECEC. This vision, Waters and Payler (2015) suggest, 'is challenging, it is complex and requires deep understanding of the nature of professional learning and refuses to accept the *status quo*' (p. 163, original emphasis).

Integrating centre-based taught sessions and work-based elements provided the early years practitioners studying on the SEFDEY programme with opportunities to learn within different learning communities. Each community can be seen as '... a space in which people come together; explore, enquire and exchange views, opinions and knowledge; and learn and grow as a community' (University of Hertfordshire School of Education, 2006). The SEFDEY participants' communities included their peers, both within the workplace and the programme cohort; their managers, mentors, tutors and programme managers; parents and children within their setting; and their friends and family. The findings suggest that students saw themselves as professionals and were engaging in professional learning, giving rise to some interesting questions. For example, did the students recognise themselves as 'professional learners' and if so, is this important for their future identities as learners? What does it mean to be a professional learner within the ECEC workforce? Would seeing themselves as professional learners contribute to changing the perceptions of others; providing as Eraut (1994, p. 21) argues opportunities for 'challenging traditional assumptions and acquiring new perspectives'.

### *Implications for practice*

Studies that report early years educators' views (e.g. Egan 2004, Brock 2013), and this research, which engaged participants with primarily care responsibility contribute practitioners' voices to discussions about what it means to develop as an early years professional. In the context of teacher education, Loughran (2006) has emphasised the particular value for students of knowledge gained from their peers; and these students' insights will be of interest to early years students as well as ECEC practitioners, policy-makers and teachers in further and higher education. The students identified the impact of studying a new vocational degree programme, focusing on the development of their professional and learner identities and aspects of practical implementation of the programme. Their accounts and those of other contributors illustrate the 'reconstruction of the identity', which Egan (2004, p.22) notes is significant for those studying vocational degrees. Here, the students saw themselves as professionals who were engaging in professional learning; they provided glimpses of diverse workplaces, the focus of some of their learning, highlighting complexities inherent in ECEC settings. The backdrop of change and uncertainty in ECEC

policy and practice both nationally (Payler et al 2017) and internationally (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014) highlights the importance of providing professional learning and development opportunities that enable practitioners to undergo 'systematic, sustainable and transformative change' (Waters and Payler 2015, p. 163) themselves and to become proactive in making such change where they work. Triangulating the students' perceptions with those of others, primarily their managers and mentors, the narratives suggest that the SEFDEY students became confident, reflective professionals and learners who were proactive in sharing their learning with colleagues, children and parents and sought to implement change in their settings. These research findings have implications for developing ECEC practitioners, new to academic study, as 'professional learners', learners who value, use and share learning and demonstrate enthusiasm for learning in settings where they are uniquely placed to influence children at an early stage of their learner journey.

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