

# **Gaining professional recognition: exploring professionalism and professional identity of early years practitioners in higher education**

Claire Dickerson\* and Lyn Trodd

School of Education, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

\*Corresponding author:

Email: [j.e.c.dickerson@herts.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.c.dickerson@herts.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

Professionalisation of the early years workforce internationally foregrounds what it means to gain professional recognition as an early years practitioner and has important implications for developing vocational programmes in higher education. This article explores two early years practitioners' professionalism and developing professional identities as they undertook a new undergraduate degree programme whilst employed full-time in UK early childhood settings. Using the practitioners' learning stories and insights from their managers and mentors, this article examines evidence for changes in their professional identities; illustrates how they used their learning in practice; and identifies learning about their professionalism.

Significantly, it contributes to the understanding of professional identity, professionalism and professionalism of early years practitioners and questions whether 'threshold concepts', after Meyer and Land, differ depending on students' prior experience of practice. The findings inform understandings of the way higher education programmes can enable practitioners to develop themselves and contribute to their profession.

**Keywords:** early years practitioners; learning stories; professional identity; professionalism; professional learning; workplace learning

## Introduction

According to Carter (1993, 6) 'story is a mode of knowing that captures in a special fashion the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs'. Acknowledging Carter's (1993) view, this article critiques two early years practitioners' learning stories to gain greater understanding of professionalism, professionalism and professional identity for members of this workforce. The stories and insights of their managers and mentors were documented during research of a new Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years (SEFDEY) programme. The findings inform an understanding of the way higher education programmes can afford opportunities for employed practitioners to develop themselves and their profession.

## Context

### *The early years workforce*

According to OECD (2001, 7, original emphasis), 'The term *early childhood education and care* (ECEC) includes all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content'. Internationally, the complex role that ECEC practitioners have in supporting the development of young children is increasingly valued and acknowledged (Campbell-Barr, Georgeson, and Selbie 2015). This work is influenced by culture, history, politics and other factors and there are differences in qualification requirements for ECEC practitioners both within and between countries (Campbell-Barr, Georgeson, and Selbie 2015). There are also questions about which professionals should be acknowledged as members of the ECEC workforce (Skattebol, Adamson, and Woodrow 2016). In Europe, supporting the professionalisation of members of this workforce and increasing the prestige of the profession are among measures proposed to raise the quality of ECEC provision ([2011] OJ C 175/8).

In 2004, the UK Government's childcare strategy (HM Treasury 2004) proposed significant reforms to the childcare workforce qualifications, many of which were designed to 'professionalise' and to improve the status of practitioners working with pre-school children. The rationale for this professionalisation policy is based on studies such as Sylva et al.'s (2004) longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, which showed a clear relationship between improving the quality of children's experience in early years settings and better outcomes for their learning and development. The qualifications and training of staff are important contributors to the quality of this experience. A study involving a sample of Millennium Cohort Study children in England (Mathers et al. 2007) and other studies cited by Nutbrown (2012) in her review of ECEC qualifications have confirmed an association between staff qualifications and quality of childcare settings. Using 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, 21) found 'a consistent association between the quality of preschool staff training and qualifications and later school performance' for the European data.

In the UK, ECEC policy and curricula differ across the four nations: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Boyd and Hirst 2016). In England, the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) launched the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) standards in 2007. These standards provided the basis for assessing and accrediting the EYPS award (CWDC 2006) during the SEFDEY programme reported in this article. EYPS was designed for professionals responsible for leading the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), from birth to five years (Teaching Agency 2012). Findings from a three-year study of the impact of EYPS suggested that eighty-five per cent of the early years professionals surveyed felt that it had enhanced their sense of professional standing and seventy-five per cent felt that it had given them greater credibility among their colleagues (Hadfield et al. 2012). The EYPS programme was subsequently replaced by early years teacher status (EYTS) (Department for Education 2017).

### ***Professional identity***

Whilst education and training play a part in developing or maintaining professional identity (McGillivray 2008), there are many influential factors so the picture for each individual is complex. Working with teachers, Flores and Day (2006, 220) described identity 'as an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences'. The development of professional identity 'is conceived as a process of continual blending of personal self with professional self that requires professionals to develop and sustain awareness of the situated, relative and relational positions of their own professional identity and practices' (Trodd 2012, 53). Spillane (2000, 308) highlighted the complexity of 'identity' in his exploration of a teacher's identity as both a teacher and a learner, arguing 'that her identity was more multiple rather than unitary' and recognising that her identity as a learner was significantly different in two subject areas. Sachs (2001) also refers to the multiple nature of professional identities in terms of categorisation. In early years settings this might be illustrated as a practitioner who is defined as a child minder

and then as a child minder who specialises in working with children with special educational needs.

Recent emphasis on the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce has raised issues about what it means to be an early years professional, and several authors (e.g. Egan 2004; McGillivray 2008; Simpson 2010; Murray 2013) have explored the meaning of the terms 'professional identity' and 'professionalism' within this context. Egan (2004) used early years students' responses to writing frames to identify categories such as personal attributes, personal interest or satisfaction, 'theoretical' knowledge, professional knowledge, professional skills and values that characterised their understanding of professional identity. Characteristics relating to emotions and caring have been identified as integral to professionalism for ECEC practitioners; for example, the '*language of care*' (Egan 2004, 28); and '*passionate care*' (Murray 2013, 538), both original emphasis. Simpson (2010, 8) too, referred to 'emotional discourse' to capture those aspects of professionalism expressed by early years interviewees. Working with student health professionals in higher education, Clouder (2005) suggested that caring might be considered what Meyer and Land (2003, 1) describe as a 'threshold concept'. Such a concept 'represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress' (Meyer and Land 2003, 1). Despite the emphasis on 'caring' and associated traits in the literature and among ECEC practitioners themselves, this characteristic is not always dominant in national standards. For example, whilst ensuring effective 'care of all children' was mentioned in the preamble to the EYPS Standards (Teaching Agency 2012, 5), this language was not repeated within the standards themselves; these focused on what might be seen as the rational rather than the affective language that Osgood (2010) noted in policy discourse in England.

### ***Professionalism***

In this article, the term 'professionalism' is used to emphasise the contribution individual practitioners can make to their profession, drawing on the work of Evans (2008, 25) who viewed professionalism as 'The "singular" unit of professionalism', whilst professionalism might be seen 'as a collective notion: as a plurality, shared by many'. Evans (2008, 35) reflected that 'the individualistic elemental nature of professionalism – its basis of individuals' professionalism as a singular unit, and the inherent diversity that this imposes upon it – remains generally unrecognised'. Also helpful is Egan's (2004, 23) previous use of

'the term "professionalism" to apply to the developing teacher's understanding of her/himself as a professional in the sense of constructing, holding, re-evaluating and reconstructing a set of professional values which will bear upon the ways in which s/he carries out her/his work in a practice setting.'

### ***Identity, narrative and storytelling***

Storytelling is a common medium of communication within early years settings, where young children's learning experiences are frequently documented using 'learning stories' (Carr 2001). In educational studies, narrative is increasingly used as both the type of experience studied and the method of inquiry and storytelling is one approach used to collect data

(Connelly and Clandinin 1990). A professional's identity is closely related to storytelling and story. Identity is seen as a developing life story (McAdams 2003), and Wojecki (2007, 172), informed by the work of Ricoeur (1986), reflected that 'storytelling is the medium through which self-presentation (or identity) is constructed and maintained'. Such stories are of value to professionals, as Drake, Spillane, and Hufferd-Ackles (2001, 2) explain in their work with teachers: 'Stories, as lived and told by teachers, serve as the lens through which they understand themselves personally and professionally and through which they view the content and context of their work...' Wojecki's (2007, 169) cautionary observation on their nature and content is useful when seeking to understand and interpret adult learners' stories:

'some stories that adult learners tell about themselves may not accurately portray their skills, experiences, and abilities. Some version of identities that adult learners construct may become dominant and more visible than others, resulting in learners not noticing (or valuing) alternative tellings and possibilities for seeing their strengths and dispositions to learning'.

The research reported in this article documented early years practitioners' developing professional identities and professionalism through story. Two accounts are explored and critiqued drawing on the work of Egan (2004), Simpson (2010) and Murray (2013) on the characteristics of early years practitioners' identities.

### **The programme**

The SEFDEY programme was designed by experienced educators within a London local authority (local government area) and the School of Education, University of Hertfordshire, UK. This vocational programme was developed in response to a national policy target for all full daycare settings to be graduate-led by 2015 (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007). The undergraduate student participants were in full-time employment in childcare and education settings and included practitioners working within the borough, an area of deprivation (Greater London Authority Intelligence 2016). Thirty-nine students enrolled across two cohorts starting a year apart. Programme sessions were scheduled on Fridays and Saturdays at the local Staff Development Centre, supporting participation by employed practitioners who found it difficult to attend day-time courses and travel to the University. Students completed eight modules (Table 1) and developed a range of employment, practical and core professional skills. Each student had a mentor whose role was to: support them on the programme; facilitate the work-based aspect of the module; and verify evidence that the student provided to demonstrate the professional practice aspect of the degree. In order to fulfil this role the mentor met regularly with the student, observed them working with children, provided feedback following observations and monitored the student's progress.

**Table 1. Programme modules**

	<b>Module title</b>
1	<i>Personal and professional skills for the early years practitioner</i>
2	<i>Starting with the child/advanced child development</i>
3	<i>Fulfilling legal and professional responsibilities</i>
4	<i>Workplace module 1: enabling, supporting and managing children's care and learning in the workplace</i>
5	<i>Workplace module 2: evidence-based decision making at work to support change</i>
6	<i>Leadership and management in children's workforce settings</i>
7	<i>Professional diversity and common goals</i>
8	<i>Curriculum frameworks</i>

The 'sector endorsed' nature of the programme acknowledged that it was based on relevant UK standards (Ingleby and Hedges 2012). Issues relating to what it means to be an early years professional together with the emergent views of early years professionalism as either mainly socially determined or alternatively as actively influenced by practitioners themselves (Simpson 2010) have important implications for developers of early years degree programmes. Referring to Kram's earlier work, Higgins and Kram (2001, 278) assert that 'increased clarity of professional identity (one's unique talents and contributions at work)' is one outcome of 'personal learning'. Learning is the process of acquiring knowledge and also arises when current knowledge is used in different settings or in different ways (Eraut 2000). 'Learning that is directly engaged with the doing of practice is learning that is situated, dialogic, collective, shared, participatory...' (Lee and Dunston 2011, 492). Such learning can occur both in the workplace and in higher education settings, if, as Lee and Dunston (2011, 492) suggested, 'Formal education, including professional education, is itself a practice, or set of practices that bear a particular, complex relationship to the practices they purport to represent and advance'. The SEFDEY programme was informed by a constructivist approach to learning and included work-related learning and assessment and study skills. Social constructivism and social constructionism are theories of knowledge that draw on sociology, philosophy and symbolic interactionism. Knowledge is constructed socially, in relationship with others (Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler 2008; Hruby 2001; Schwandt 2000; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999). Learning is active, built on the foundations of previous learning, tied

to language development and occurs more readily in learner-centred environments (Kanuka and Anderson 1999).

Eraut (2000, 113, 114) suggested that two types of knowledge are needed for professional work; one is 'codified knowledge' or 'public knowledge or propositional knowledge' that is communicable, explicit and central to programmes of formal education and training that lead to a qualification. Whilst programmes such as SEFDEY might be expected to include theoretical knowledge, they can also elicit and develop the second type of knowledge and enable professionals to enhance the skills required to continue to develop and build on this type of knowledge. This 'personal knowledge' is developed by a professional over time and is 'highly situated and individualistic' (Eraut 2000, 28); defined 'as what individuals bring to situations that enables them to think, interact and perform' (Eraut 2004, 263). Such personal or 'tacit knowledge' includes 'everyday knowledge' (Eraut 2004, 253, 264), which is synonymous (Andrew 2015) with 'phronesis, practical wisdom, or perceptual knowledge' (Kessels and Korthagen 1996, 20). Phronesis 'involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented toward action' (Kinsella and Pitman 2012, 2). In early childhood settings phronesis has been described as 'everyday knowledge, the logic of practice, which comes from daily engagement with the particular tasks of working with children, and the embodied knowledge that develops as a result' (Andrew 2015, 352).

## **Research approach**

### ***Method and aims***

This evaluation research study was conducted by the University SEFDEY programme lead; the local authority training officer; and two researchers from the University who were independent of programme development (Trodd and Dickerson 2019). Ethical approval was obtained through the relevant University ethics committee and participants provided written consent. One research aim was to explore how the programme had helped to continue to shape the students' identities as learners and as professionals from the perspective of the student practitioners and their managers and mentors. Qualitative methods provided ways of 'capturing and communicating the *participants' stories*' (Patton 2002, 10, original emphasis). Data were collected through learning stories, two of which, together with the associated reflections, are used to address the following research questions in this article:

- Is there evidence for the early years practitioners' professional identity development? (Do the accounts suggest that characteristics of their professional identities changed as they engaged in the degree programme? If so, how did the characteristics change?)
- How did the early years practitioners use learning from the degree programme in their workplace? (How did their practice change?)
- What can we learn about early years practitioners' professional identities, their professionalism and their contribution to professionalism? (What new understanding do they have of their professional self that influences their practice? What contribution are they making to their profession?)

### ***Participants and data collection***

Eleven early years practitioners, all female, eight from black and minority ethnic groups, were recruited using purposeful sampling. With an approximate age range from twenties to late fifties, participants worked within a range of settings and their roles included childminder, learning support assistant, nursery nurse and nursery practitioner. Both student cohorts were represented; some participants were nearing the end of the first year and others had almost completed the programme. The students' stories were personal narratives detailing their learning during their study, in response to the following statements:

1. 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...
2. Describe how this programme has developed you personally...
3. Describe a particularly challenging element of this programme for you. What challenged you, and how did you respond to this challenge?

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2) 'learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories'. Here, the learning stories approach was used to record the experiences of adult learners new to academic study, enabling them to articulate, interpret and make sense of their learning and development to themselves and others. This article includes the responses of two students, Rachel and Maureen (both pseudonyms), to the second of the three statements, together with the accompanying reflections, their own and those of their manager and mentor. As Ryan and Carmichael (2016, 163) suggest 'sharing [reflections] with others in new and different ways, can lead to much more powerful and generative understandings of self'.

The research lead invited each student participant to complete a learning story proforma and then document an accompanying reflection before returning the completed proforma to the research lead. Rodgers (2002), distilling the work of Dewey, identified a criterion of reflection as making meaning, providing progression of learning from one experience to another with greater understanding of linkages with other ideas and experiences. Reflection was emphasised throughout the programme and including opportunities for exercising reflective skills during the research encouraged the students to make sense of and gain greater understanding of the episode recorded in their narrative. The research lead forwarded each completed proforma to the student's local authority mentor and manager so that they could add their reflections, providing additional perspectives. Using an open-ended question gave each student an opportunity to voice issues of personal significance although their contribution might have been influenced by knowing that their response would be reviewed by their manager and mentor.

### ***Data management and analysis***

The learning stories and personal reflections were submitted via email, providing typed data texts, which were collated by the research fellow who managed the data analysis. The data were content analysed (Patton 2002; Schreir 2012) to explore different themes and the students' stories were searched electronically for selected key words (Ryan and Bernard 2003) relevant to developing early years practitioners' identities as professionals and as professional



learners. Findings from this analysis, reported elsewhere, suggested that the students became confident, reflective professionals and learners who shared their learning with colleagues, children and parents and sought to implement change in their settings (Trodd and Dickerson 2019). In this article, the focus is on Rachel and Maureen as individuals. Whilst all of the research participants' contributions are rich and of value for learning, the accounts Rachel and Maureen provided and the accompanying insights from their manager and mentor encompass a cluster of features of particular relevance here. They are 'Information-rich cases ... from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry'; examining such examples 'yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations' (Patton 2002, 230). In their stories Rachel and Maureen both suggest that they are gaining professional recognition. Rachel's assertion is explicit (*The programme has provided me with the confidence to gain a professional recognition for my role as a child minder*); whilst Maureen's acknowledgement is less direct (*I felt this particular parent who was quite obviously a professional, respected me and appreciated the fact that I knew what I was speaking about*). Taken as a whole the contributions relating to Rachel and Maureen also refer to the following four characteristics of interest: confidence, reflection, knowledge and caring. Although one other contribution met these particular criteria, in that example, the feedback from the manager and mentor focused less clearly on the student. In this article, the learning stories and accompanying reflections are provided as direct quotations, with minimal editing. They are critiqued in relation to their professionalism and developing professional identity by focusing on selected characteristics of identity within the categories derived by Egan (2004); a personal attribute (confidence); a professional skill (reflection); and 'theoretical' and professional knowledge. The findings are also used to explore the practitioners' references to emotions and caring, using insights from the work of Egan (2004), Simpson (2010) and (Murray 2013) on characteristics of professionalism for early years professionals.

## **Findings and discussion**

This section presents and critiques Rachel's and Maureen's stories and accompanying reflections and seeks to respond to each research question in turn. The section concludes with implications for theory and practice.

### ***Learning stories***

Recounting their stories of learning as part of the research might in itself have contributed to the students' professional development. Whilst Wojecki's (2007) advisory on the nature and content of adult learners' stories is helpful, the following narratives provide a rich source of enquiry and reflection. Focusing principally on the students' views, with additional insights voiced by managers and mentors, the stories provide examples of the perceived impact of the programme on the students as practitioners and also on the children, families and colleagues with whom they worked. Rachel's and Maureen's accounts are contextualised by providing an outline of their responses to the preceding invitation to '*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...*' The complete responses to this invitation are not presented in the students' words because they might reveal the identities of others within their setting.

*Rachel's story - feeling and acting as a professional*

Rachel's story was about a quiet child of almost three years of age who found socialisation with other children difficult and whose parents were anxious about their child's progress. Rachel described how she took time to build a relationship with them, carried out home visits, engaged in discussions and used learning from the programme to provide personalised information and direction for further support.

*As Rachel explained.* I used the skills I had learnt on this course to provide accurate, factual information to the parents and their child's individual development. I was able to produce a profile with observations, evaluations and planning. This knowledge enabled me to support the parents through a very anxious period...

The child settled into the setting, becoming confident, more sociable and independent and with improved language skills while his/her parents became more relaxed.

Leading on from this story, Rachel responded to the invitation to '*Describe how this programme has developed you personally...*' with this account:

*Rachel's learning story (narrative).* The programme has provided me with the confidence to gain a professional recognition for my role as a child minder. I am now aware of many aspects of child development and how to support development and learning. I have the knowledge and experiences to support families in working together to support their child. I feel the programme has enabled me to expand my business and offer better outcomes for children and families in my setting. My confidence has increased and I am always keen to update my ever increasing knowledge.

*Rachel's reflection.* This programme has totally changed the way I work. I have a renewed enthusiasm for my role, which I was previously considering changing. 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. I have a renewed confidence in myself and the decisions I make regarding my setting, the children, staff and families that I work with. I feel and act as a professional, confident that I have an ever expanding knowledge to support these decisions. The study has given me a new thirst to continually develop my knowledge and understanding and enhance my knowledge with my professional development. The programme has provided me with the tools to build a new foundation for me and my setting and the confidence to continue to reflect on everything I do.

Rachel's manager and mentor then added their reflections to Rachel's account.

*Rachel's manager's reflection.* It is evident that Rachel's confidence is having a positive impact on her role as a child minder. This is displayed by her knowledge of child development and how this translates in her daily practice. She now has a clearer understanding of the direction in which her business is growing and is eager to continue her path of professional development.

*Rachel's mentor's reflection.* Throughout the course Rachel's confidence has been growing as a child minder which has enabled her to expand her business. She has always been very caring and conscientious in her dealings with the children and parents

establishing good relationships. The course has made her a very reflective practitioner wishing to keep updating her knowledge of children's learning and development.

Finally, Rachel summarised the impact of the programme on her personal development.

*Rachel's final reflection.* Overall the programme has changed my attitude to my role as a child minder and my role as a mother and wife. I have new motivation to succeed and now acknowledge that I do have the right skills to progress and strive for progress and higher standards in everything that I do. I feel and act like a professional, which has enhanced my self-confidence and self esteem.

#### *Maureen's story - gaining knowledge, understanding and maturity*

Maureen set the scene with an account of a meeting at work with a single parent of a two year old child who would be accompanied to and from the nursery by a nanny. During induction, Maureen responded to the parent's many questions about the policies at the setting and their legal context.

*Maureen continues her story.* One year ago I would have stopped this conversation, asked her politely to hold on and fetched a manager or deputy to answer these questions. However I did not have to get anyone. I was comfortable enough to discuss the policies we had in the setting, such as safeguarding, behaviour, etc. Further to this I was able to discuss recent and up to date legislation, which gave reason or support to some of these policies. During SEFDEY we had an assignment on policies and legislation in early years. Now that I have read and written about why we do what we do, examined laws and identified policies, I felt this particular parent who was quite obviously a professional, respected me and appreciated the fact that I knew what I was speaking about.

After this story, Maureen gave the following response to the invitation to '*Describe how this programme has developed you personally...*':

*Maureen's learning story (narrative).* Participating in SEFDEY has helped me develop personally in my self-confidence in my job role. As a person I am generally quite confident anyway, however I always felt that I never had enough experience at work, in comparison to other staff members. However I have changed my perspective and even some of my colleague's perspectives too. I have become more confident voicing my ideas, backing it up with theory and implementing my ideas in my setting. I have even been able to feed back some of my knowledge, enhanced because of SEFDEY to the people I work with, especially policy and legislation.

When I became an early years practitioner, it was never a job role I had in my mind from school... However when I went to [setting] for work experience I fell in love with two children, who had additional needs. That was the moment I decided this is what I wanted to do. Before working with children, I never understood or really thought about all the planning, work and training you had to do. Naively I thought it would be more like baby-sitting. Now that I am an undergraduate I can see the importance of my job clearly, but more importantly I can share the importance of my job with other professionals, parents and of course, the children.

*Maureen's reflection.* This programme is very important to me because I almost never had the chance to be a part of it... Luckily fate helped me along. I have grown in my job role over the past year. I have gained knowledge, understanding and maturity in what I do.

Maureen's manager and mentor reflected as follows on Maureen's account.

*Maureen's manager's reflection.* I feel that Maureen has grown considerably in her role since she started the foundation degree. Maureen has been training and mentoring students which [she] is very happy to do. Maureen is very passionate in her job which is shown in her standards of her care for the children, parents and her colleagues. Maureen has become more reflective in her practice.

*Maureen's mentor's reflection.* Maureen has worked hard to develop her skills as a reflective practitioner. I have observed that Maureen responds to each child's individual needs and I feel her practice is truly child-centred.

### ***Evidence for professional identity development***

Rachel's *confidence*, highlighted in her narrative account and reflections, provides a starting point for her manager's and mentor's reflections. Eldred et al.'s (2004, 6) working definition of confidence is that it is 'a belief in one's own abilities to do something in a specific situation. This belief includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation'. Student teachers identified 'cognitive, emotional (affective), and performance components' of confidence (Norman and Hyland 2003, 266); that is, 'thought, actions and feelings, those attributes of efficacy also present in learning and reflection, and which also contribute to a sense of agency and professional responsibility' (Dyer and Taylor 2012, 554). Here, Rachel refers to her increasing confidence and suggests that the programme has 'given' her the confidence to *achieve* and *act* ('confidence to gain a professional recognition'; 'confidence to continue to reflect'); and confidence to *be* and *become* ('confidence to become a far more reflective practitioner'; 'renewed confidence in myself'). Her manager and mentor suggest this is having a 'positive impact' on her professional role as well as enabling her to develop her business.

Eldred et al. (2004, 6) assert that both 'overall' and 'situational' confidence can be gained through learning and Rachel's story and associated reflections suggest a spiral of increasing confidence associated with taking part in the programme. This seems to move from knowledge and experience to greater skill; to confidence to gain professional recognition for her role and to become more reflective in her practice and with 'a new thirst to continually develop my knowledge and understanding'. In turn, Rachel asserts that feeling and behaving as a professional has 'enhanced' her 'self-confidence and self esteem'. The association of confidence and knowledge in parts of the text suggest that this confidence might, on occasion, be what van Manen (2008, 19) described as 'the active knowledge itself, the tact of knowing what to do or not to do, what to say or not to say' rather than of an emotional nature.

Although Maureen portrays herself as 'generally quite confident', she associates taking part in the programme with developing self-confidence in her work role and refers to the way this has influenced her 'voice' and practice. Whilst Maureen's narrative contains fewer direct references to confidence, this attribute, as defined by Eldred et al. (2004), is implicit in the

way she writes about her new perception of the importance of her job and shares this view with others.

Enquiring into personal practice and developing enquiry-based knowledge are necessary for reflective practice, or according to Minott (2010) reflective teaching, in which the responsibility for knowledge development is transferred to the individual. Reflection is cited in both narratives, both as a personal attribute (the students are described as reflective practitioners), and as a professional skill; 'the confidence to continue to reflect on everything I do' (Rachel's reflection) and 'Maureen has become more reflective in her practice' (Maureen's manager). Rachel implies that confidence was a pre-cursor to reflective practice, supporting Spillane's (2000, 326) observation that a school teacher's confidence in a subject area 'meant that she adopted a reflective stance, actively constructing and reconstructing ideas about teaching'.

Throughout their studies, Rachel and Maureen could draw on work-related knowledge, defined by Minott (2010, 325) 'as that which I build up on the job as I grapple with the daily challenges of teaching and as I seek to refine my professional practice'; and 'everyday knowledge' (Eraut 2004, 264) or 'phronesis, practical wisdom' (Kessels and Korthagen 1996, 20). A model of learning available in teacher education literature might be helpful here; as active learners teachers are thought to develop gestalts based on practical experiences of teaching that they can develop through reflection into schema and theory (Korthagen and Lagerwerf 1996; Korthagen and Kessels 1999; Korthagen 2010). Korthagen (2010, 411) describes a gestalt as 'a dynamic and constantly changing entity, encompassing the whole of a teacher's perception of the here-and-now situation, i.e. both sensory perceptions of the environment as well as the images, thoughts, feelings, needs, values, and behavioural tendencies triggered by the situation'; thus 'the *gestalt level*' (410, original emphasis) is based on experience in practice. Might recalling some of these experiences during their studies enable experienced practitioners to reflect on and visualise how they might use taught knowledge in their future practice?

### ***How the early years practitioners used learning from the programme***

Egan (2004, 26, 27 original emphasis), in her study of early years education students, distinguished between 'theoretical' knowledge, informing '*phronetic judgement*' and 'professional' knowledge, 'knowledge of *how to act ... underpinning praxis*', which according to Loughran (2002, 40) can be 'developed through effective reflective practice'. Practical wisdom or phronesis is one form of praxis (Andrew 2015). References to child development (Rachel's story) and policy and legislation (Maureen's story) suggest taught knowledge or theoretical knowledge. Rachel's manager reflects on the way Rachel's 'knowledge of child development ... translates in her daily practice' perhaps suggesting a move from 'theoretical' to "'professional' knowledge', '*underpinning praxis*' (Egan 2004, 26 original emphasis).

Rachel's references to child development and the expansion of her business suggest she is using knowledge associated with the content of programme modules 2 and 6 (Table 1). Similarly, Maureen's account implies learning aligned to the theme of module 3 (Table 1) as she explains that her newly acquired knowledge on policies and legislation had enabled her to respond to a parent's questioning. Whilst these discrete 'areas' of knowledge might be identified, the language used throughout the accounts seems to intimate that the students are

also using learning associated with ‘characteristics’ permeating the SEFDEY programme; characteristics relating to the underlying learning and teaching policy and educational purpose of the University and the philosophy and aims of the programme. The following examples might imply they have been immersed in this ‘culture’ and are using what they have learned in their practice. In these examples, excerpts from the stories and reflections are contextualised using paraphrased text and direct quotations from the programme handbook. Thus, Rachel’s approach to learning is positive and she takes responsibility for it (*The study has given me a new thirst to continually develop my knowledge and understanding and enhance my knowledge*); she reveals ‘a moral and responsible regard for others’ (*offer better outcomes for children and families in my setting; strive for progress and higher standards in everything that I do*); and through developing herself and her practice, she is ‘ready to take a leading role as an early years professional’ (*I have a renewed confidence in myself and the decisions I make regarding my setting, the children, staff and families that I work with. I feel and act as a professional*). Maureen also seems to reflect some of these more subtle aspects of learning. Thus, her manager and mentor reflect that she too reveals ‘a moral and responsible regard for others’ (*Maureen has been training and mentoring students; and responds to each child’s individual needs*); and Maureen herself acknowledges that she sees her work ‘as important and meaningful’ (*I can see the importance of my job clearly*).

Whilst knowledge arising from taught elements of the SEFDEY programme was relevant for Rachel’s and Maureen’s practice; as Eraut (2004) explained such knowledge was not contextualised and easily available for their use. Eraut (2004) viewed this process of transferring knowledge from higher education into the workplace as a complex five step transition that concludes with the transformation and integration of new knowledge into the setting. This might be seen as an ‘interpretative use of knowledge’ (Eraut 1994, 49). The intricacies and ever-changing contexts of professional practice and the unique attributes, professional and personal experiences, knowledge and skills of practitioners means that elements of taught knowledge might be adapted and used in many different ways.

### ***Learning about early years practitioners’ professional identities, their professionalism and their contribution to professionalism: Implications for theory and practice***

Together with the annotations of their managers and mentors, these practitioners’ stories contribute to building an understanding of what professional identity, professionalism and professionalism look like within the early years workforce. According to Wojecki (2007, 171) it is important ‘for adult educators to become curious and interested in learners’ stories, in particular the previous stories which shape their current self-making and identity construction’. Beattie (2000, 19), working with prospective teachers, noted the necessarily personal nature of the accounts and the learning:

‘The narrative accounts show that the creation of a professional identity is a unique process for each prospective teacher, and that the process involves the examination and transformation of existing knowledge and the adaptation of such knowledge, skills and attitudes to the professional situations at hand. For each individual, what has to be learned is intimately connected to what is already known’.

Engaging in 'the examination and transformation of existing knowledge' during the process of creating a professional identity (Beattie 2000, 19) suggests learning of the nature described by Mezirow (1997). Mezirow (1997, 11) associated such 'transformative learning' with helping an adult 'become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others'.

Through applying the concept of the 'professional self, a personal conception of oneself as a teacher' (Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe 1993, 2), the stories Rachel and Maureen prepared have been used to develop the following thumbnail sketches. These portrayals of them as re-authored ECEC professionals resulting from their participation in the programme illustrate their professionalism, as described by Egan (2004) and Evans (2008):

*Rachel is a professionally recognised child minder running an expanding business, striving for progress and higher standards in everything she does. Confident and reflective, Rachel has renewed enthusiasm, new motivation and enhanced self-confidence and self esteem. She has an ever increasing knowledge of child development and awareness of how to support development and learning and to work together with families to support their child.*

*Maureen is a caring early years practitioner, an undergraduate with a clear view of the importance of her job role, which she shares with other professionals, parents and the children. She is confident in voicing her ideas, sharing her new knowledge, particularly of policy and legislation, with those in her setting, and implementing her ideas. Maureen has developed her self-confidence in her role and gained knowledge, understanding and maturity in what she does.*

Several authors have emphasised the prominence of emotional and caring aspects of the early years practitioners' professional role (e.g. Egan 2004; Simpson 2010; Harwood et al. 2013; Murray 2013). This 'culture of care', noted earlier, encompassing affective, emotional traits and conscientiousness (Osgood 2010, 126) is evidenced in the learning stories. Rachel's mentor reflects that Rachel 'has always been very caring and conscientious in her dealings with the children and parents'; and Maureen explains that she decided to become an early years practitioner when she 'fell in love with two children, who had additional needs' during work experience. McGillivray's (2008, 245) concern that 'A tension arises from the dichotomy between a workforce that is construed as caring, maternal and gendered, as opposed to professional, degree educated and highly trained' is not apparent here. Indeed, the stories do not suggest that the caring aspect of professionalism posed a challenge for Rachel and Maureen as early years practitioners; an interesting reflection given Clouder's (2005) consideration of caring as a 'threshold concept' (Meyer and Land 2003, 1) for student health professionals in higher education. Although these stories provide evidence of change in selected professional characteristics categories derived by Egan (2004): confidence (a personal attribute); reflection (a professional skill); and 'theoretical' and professional knowledge; they suggest little, if any, change in the caring aspect of their identities. Whilst this observation is tentative, and the context and nature of caring that Clouder (2005) discussed is different, it raises questions about the nature of challenging concepts for students who enter higher education as experienced practitioners. Do these concepts differ from those of students who begin their undergraduate programme without experience of practice, and if

so, how do they differ, and what are the implications of these differences for educators? Drawing on Spillane's (2000, 308) concept of identity as 'more multiple rather than unitary' might some characteristics of an experienced early years practitioner's identity be more available for 'constructing and reconstructing' (326) than others? For example, might knowledge and skills be more open to being changed than caring, that might be considered related to the 'practical wisdom' (Kessels and Korthagen 1996, 20) that is values-based (Kinsella and Pitman 2012) and rooted in practice? More broadly, whilst acknowledging that each practitioner is unique, might the sequence of students' encounters with higher education and practice lead to particular differences in professional identities, professionalism and contributions to professionalism?

The students' stories illustrate the way professional identities and professionalism can develop as students engage in professional learning in higher education programmes and early years settings. Whilst it is not possible to generalise, these stories do provide a rich source of learning for academics and practitioners with an interest and expertise in this field and make an important contribution to the understanding of professional identity, professionalism and professionalism within the early years workforce. Significantly, drawing on a varied literature base, the stories are used to raise questions about whether the sequence of students' encounters with higher education and practice might lead to particular differences in professional identities, professionalism and contributions to professionalism. Within teacher education, Loughran (2002, 42) stressed the importance of working with actual situations if students' learning through their experience is to result in understanding and developing professional knowledge; ultimately 'empowering them as professionals'. Higher education programmes, such as the SEFDEY programme, can enable busy practitioners both to develop themselves and their profession through engaging in professional learning and discourse and through reflecting on, developing and sharing their knowledge and practice. In this way they can contribute to meeting one of the aims of higher education, 'to enhance the knowledge creation and utilisation capacities of individual professionals and professional communities in general' (Eraut 1985, 119).

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