Reflections on Professionalism: Driving Forces that Refine and Shape Professional Practice

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ABSTRACT: Early education systems in England require those who work alongside children to follow policies intended to promote quality early education and care. Their professional role is embedded into those systems and includes promoting integrated inter-professional working, safeguarding children's welfare, supporting children to meet national early learning goals and promoting inclusive education. Their professional responsibilities include demonstrating sound pedagogical practice and a detailed developmental assessment of children. They are also asked to forge positive relationships with families and are accountable to parents and regulators. This paper provokes further thinking and exploration of these roles, responsibilities and relationships. It asks whether existing regulatory systems are the driving forces which shape professional practice and determine professionalism or if there is more to being a competent, adaptive, reflective early educator.

Keywords: early childhood, professionalism, professional practice, educational quality, systems

*Short papers

Introduction and context

Those who work in the early childhood sector in England have experienced significant change over the last twenty years. These changes have impacted on a range of provision such as day care centres to small pre-schools and nurseries. It also includes childminders, who educate children in their own domestic environment and those who support the education of young children in state run or independent schools. The numbers of people involved in caring and educating young children is quite considerable, as can be seen in a report from the Department for Education (DfE, 2017). This explains that in 2016 it is estimated there were 25,500 small group-based providers; 17,900 school-based providers and 46,600 registered childminders in England. The total personnel in the sector is estimated at 452,000. Some of these are qualified teachers, some hold a university degree and most early education educators hold vocational qualifications.

Faulkner and Coates (2013) provide a detailed critical appraisal of the changes which have occurred over these decades and argue this has produced a range of professional requirements which have influenced a gradual professionalisation of the children's workforce. For example, in England there has been a close examination and refinement of the early education curriculum, including a review of developmental learning goals. There has also been a detailed review of staff qualifications and training, as well as the release of a raft of directives and statutory changes which have impacted on the design of professional qualifications. There have also been changes to the way early education provision is appraised and monitored. In particular, a national statutory framework of inspection was established to assess and monitor provision to determine if it demonstrates quality practice. (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, Ofsted, 2013; 2015).

The inspection itself follows a short period of notice and is carried out by a registered and experienced inspector who gathers evidence of the ways both structural (regulatory) and process (day-to-day interactions) are evidenced in practice. The result is a written report, entered into the public domain and an overall grade which indicates if the provision is performing to a set criteria. If the provision is considered to be effective, it may be given a descriptor of 'outstanding'. The inspection process itself involves a close examination of key areas which when taken together represent effective practice. For example, there is an examination of effective leadership, the implementation of statutory legal requirements, curriculum planning, evidence of children's learning and the way the provision develops relationships with parents. It also involves close observations of professional interactions with children.

This process is described by Hadfield, Joplin and Needham (2015, 6) as an "avalanche of change" which they suggest has led to an increasingly complex and diverse landscape of early education provision. What this has not done, is to offer much in terms of ways to improve pay and conditions. This area remains a focus for many commentators who argue that the profession deserves higher remuneration to meet these changes and challenges, and what are now seen as required standards of professionalism (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; EIU, 2012; EYPCS, 2016).

It can therefore be argued that professional roles and responsibilities have been increasingly influenced by Government inquiries, reports and reviews which have in turn prompted changes to the system within which educators work. In sum, these changes have inevitably prompted debate and raised questions about the nature of professionalism in the early education sector in England. For example, a question was raised about who determines the accepted behaviour for a profession. In particular, does it arise from policy makers and the regulations which determine and monitor the systems? Moreover, what voice do educators have in determining and evaluating change and monitoring systems? It has also caused those in the sector to ask whether policies and systems are increasingly defining, refining and shaping the learning environments children inhabit. It is the intention of this paper to respond to such questions and engage in a debate and expose wider issues. We use reflective thinking as a means to empower further debate (Hanson & Appleby, 2015, 24–35).

Professionalism and systems

A useful definition of professionalism comes from Clandinin and Connelly (1995, 5). They suggest that behaving professionally is deemed to mean *"proceeding in an ethical manner, with reference to a professional code of conduct"*. Furthermore, they suggest professionalism is evidenced when a *"person is willing and able to use practical knowledge and skills to enhance the agreed goals of the profession"*. Importantly, they make the point that professionalism is based upon the ability to make visible and understand it both as an intellectual and moral professional landscape. Their views provide interesting perspectives and allow us to construct a platform from which to ask: Who does determine the accepted behaviour for a profession, and to whom are members of that profession accountable? Do these determinants emanate from policy makers and the regulators who monitor the systems? Is a regulatory procedure interpreted as being a professional code; or is a professional code shaped by the way systems interface with pedagogy?

A logical response is to suggest that professional practice requires a balance between meeting the requirements of the structural systems and developing quality everyday

interactions with children. However, it is getting the balance right which is the real issue. It is all too easy to focus on meeting regulatory requirements and simply follow defined pedagogical aims, or alternatively, to focus too strongly on immediate day-to-day issues. It is therefore possible to view contemporary professionalism as the ability to understand the relationship between day-to-day practices and systems. This points to the need to consider wider overlapping dimensions such as professional practices, institutional demands, scale, power, and time (Wenger-Trayner, 2014, 99– 118).   For example:

- The way different professional communities within a sector exhibit and share competing and overlapping structural and process practices;

- Recognising that due to different provisions, there are varied institutional structures and demands within a sector;

- Recognising the importance of size, from small local provision through to large national systems and understanding the different perspectives this brings to implementing aspects of regulation and policy.

- Realising the importance of status and power, in particular, the power and status differences between professional groups and institutions.

- Being aware of patterns of change, recognising the way things change over time and the time it takes to change professional expectations, perspectives and practices.

These dimensions illustrate how professionalism should be related to different provisions and professional communities, also considering the ways they operate nationally as well as incorporating locally defined practices in the balance. Importantly, when taken together, they offer a means of reflecting on wider social and moral perspectives, for example, whether professionalism can be regarded as representing the parameters of a profession's collective remit and responsibilities.   This would include defining the boundaries of the profession's actual and potential authority, power and influence (Evans, 2008). This is not to suggest a lack of value in the systems. The inspection process, for example, is valuable because it offers the opportunity to self-evaluate and examine one's own practice and carefully consider approaches to learning.   However, it can also be seen as a process nationally organised and therefore overpowering and professionally distanced from local provision. It may therefore place too much emphasis on measuring national system requirements without recourse to the day-to-day process features of practice.

Systems driven professional expectations

Distributed leadership is an approach seen as representing positive professional integrated workplace practice. It requires an educator to demonstrate the ability to be

self-directed, take on board the concept of working as part of a team, shared responsibility and developing a collective view of ways to support children's learning. It is a process which also requires professional self-evaluation and reflection on overall standards in the profession. It is an approach seen as important because it demonstrates self-awareness and commitment to the overall quality of practice in the provision. It therefore contributes towards what Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) see as building professional capability. Indeed, there is further research evidence which suggests this approach has at its core the need to share expertise and argues that there is significant value in adopting this stance in practice (Bolden, 2011; Harris, 2007; Halttunen, 2016; Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Waniganayake, 2014). Distributed leadership is widely used in England, but its emergence is not one that has been born from a formal professional development programme or indeed from a persuasive argument from the regulators. It has emerged from the way systems and in particular the curriculum frameworks have inspired the approach to be adopted in practice (Reed, 2017). It has therefore evolved into a professional expectation for an educator and leader.

For example, the curriculum framework in England requires educators (not solely the leader of a setting) to work collaboratively and adopt an approach that involves each person taking responsibility for monitoring the welfare of a designated number of children.   This is known as the Key Person Approach (Department for Children, Schools and Family, 2008; Elfer, Goldschmied & Selleck, 2012). It involves completing detailed observations of children and requires considerable knowledge of the curriculum, as well as having considerable pedagogic awareness in order to meet the needs of a disparate group of children and their families. Responsibilities are also shared and distributed when educators are involved in completing a developmental check for children at the age of two. It can also be seen when each educator is required to be well versed in policies and procedures to protect and safeguard the welfare of children. What is more, these distributed actions are required to be made visible and the leader held accountable for planning and monitoring their implementation, as part of the formal inspection process. It is an illustration of the way practice interfaces with systems and illustrates the changing nature of what drives a view of professionalism in action.

Likewise, systems and regulatory requirements influence pedagogical practice and offer messages about professional expectations. For example, the term teaching is seen by the regulator as the ability to plan and manage the curriculum and learning in order to prepare children for the next stage in their learning, entering school (Ofsted, 2015).   The way this is interpreted in practice is important. Should this involve child-initiated play and learning opportunities and building learning around children's dispositions to learn or should it be focused on meeting goals and the outcomes expected of a child entering

school? Of course the answer is not to suggest a binary choice between one or the other, the point we make is that systems drive approaches to learning.

Professional capability, identity and qualities

It will come as no surprise that we consider professional capability as interconnected with systems and regulatory requirements. Whether it is possible to embed a person's personal professional identity and qualities into such regulated practice is another question. Our research (Walker, Reed & Sutton-Tsang, 2017) involved the co-operation of over 300 early educators, who were following a part-time degree programme whilst remaining in employment. The research elicited their views about the impact of their course of study on their professional practice. This was done by asking respondents to engage in online confidential surveys and attend face-to-face focus groups. The research also involved content and relational analysis of written accounts which described personal and professional views on practice.

The findings indicated professionalism was something which occurred over time. It was not a static process and involved a growing sense of confidence in the understanding of the alignment between theory and practice. It was also shaped by meeting the complex challenges and regulatory requirements within the workplace. The findings revealed many of the overlapping practices that determined professional practice. For example, power differences were apparent in particular when educators felt that there were day-to-day pedagogic actions which were important and the challenge became to enact these whilst attempting to meet external regulatory pressures.

Interestingly, even though the regulatory system requirements appeared to dictate universal goals and approaches it was the educators themselves (in a variety of different provision) who adapted these demands to meet the needs found within different institutions.   Finding a way through the system and making the system work was seen as being part of professional practice. This showed that meeting externally approved professional expectations was important, but so was having the professional confidence to defend an approach. This was because educators felt they had gained (over time and via professional development) the ability to critically evaluate practice – in particular, by appreciating the child's perspective and those from parents and colleagues.

Defending professional practice was also expressed as being able to reshape the children's learning or planning and feeling that the approach was valued by parents and other practitioners. Professional capability was therefore seen as being visible when there was direct impact on practice. This involved changing practice, making choices, asking

colleagues to look more deeply at situations and to then shape and develop practice, in effect taking ownership and accountability for one's actions. This was illustrated in terms of being an advocate for children and families, speaking up on their behalf and guiding children and families to their own sense of future success.

In terms of being professional this can be described as finding an interplay between acquiring knowledge, gaining a voice, striving for ethical practice and developing a professional and personal identity within a community of practice.   The research suggested professionalism was made more visible when seen within the context of locally derived professional practice, where educators were visibly seen as caring, committed and having clear values about early years education. This resonates with the work of Siraj Blatchford and Sum (2013) who suggest a respect for ethical behaviour and expressing clear values is an ingredient that ensures quality standards.

Professionalism and professional voice

Interrogating the interface between systems and pedagogical practice, is a process which can assist in revealing a shared understanding of professionalism and make professionalism visible. However, this assumes those who manage and design policies are clear about the professional, moral and political driving forces that underline the systems and promote quality. There are many varied and wide ranging factors that impact and shape the sector, such as having to follow a defined political direction. There are also economic priorities which may enhance or inhibit fiscal and budgetary policy. For example, these can be seen in the financial implications of leaving the European Union or responding to a politically driven perspective on early education that sees it solely as promoting employment opportunities for parents or facilitating primarily children's preparedness for school.   There are also political and systemic pressures to record outcomes and to have in place measures that will allow comparisons between not only what children achieve in England but internationally (OECD, 2017).

Such pressures mean that there is a need for ordinary members of the profession to articulate their views, thoughts, and ideas and perhaps challenge perceived assumptions found within systems. However, professional voice should not be assumed as being located in one part of the sector and representing all forms of provision.   Voice cannot be universal as it emerges from a range of different contexts, the local context, systems based objective context, a child focused context, an integrated working context, a professionally reflective context and a context which encompasses change and in particular systems change. These contexts and related voices are represented below, each

connected to another and each should be seen as characterising rather than defining professional voice:

- Professional voice and professionalism emerges from a localised context, meaning a particular situation, a particular time period and embedded within communities.   It is highly responsive to the communities that it serves and is therefore most heard within those communities;

- Professional voice and professionalism emerges from regulatory processes and systems which are regarded as constituting a high-quality environment for children's learning and development. Professional voice is heard in the way it meets the requirements of those systems;

- Professional voice and professionalism emerges from being alongside the child and considering what is best for a child's learning and development. It is heard in the way it reflects learning and care, warmth and concern for children and parents. It is heard in the way parents and other professional group's value and respect what goes on;

- Professional voice and professionalism is reflective and is part of an ongoing self- evaluation of practice. It is heard in the way a provision expresses and makes visible its individual values and beliefs. It is heard in the way it questions what happens in practice. It is heard in the way it critically and reflectively interrogates the relationship between day-to-day practices and systems;

- Professional voice and professionalism is heard through the way it is a component part of a life-course integrated approach to intervention and support for children and families. It is heard through the way the provision reaches out to other professional groups and how those groups see the provision on offer;

- Professional voice and professionalism is heard through the way educators manage change. This involves effective communication and is dependent upon seeing small details of practice whilst also seeing the larger picture, often influenced by current policy and statutory system requirements.

Of course, the voices which emerge from these contexts can only be heard if there is the will and a means to listen and change results. This requires a professionally derived code of practice, not one that is systems driven.   It also requires a mechanism to reflect and professionally challenge systems where they are failing those they purport to support.

Some final remarks

An examination of the regulatory processes in England would no doubt reveal a well thought through and monitored system which involves locally derived needs, child

focused pedagogy and self-evaluation. All of which is monitored by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. We asked if it is these regulatory facets that determine the accepted behaviours for a profession. It becomes clear that in many ways this is the case and policy makers and the regulations determine and monitor the systems within which the professional operates and are thus seen as professional. As to whether this provides a professional identity is less clear. We contend that professional voice and identity emerges from different contexts and is effective when it is realised how the professional voice is heard.

We also debated what might be the professional, moral and political driving forces that underline the professional expectations of early educators in the workplace. We conclude by suggesting that policies and systems are increasingly defining, refining and shaping the learning environments children inhabit. We argue that these systems in themselves may be valuable but they need to allow the early education profession to question and challenge what goes on. There is little doubt that learning through shared experience is valuable allowing models of professionalism to be identified drawing on the knowledge and experience of more senior educators. Such localised approaches are excellent but more is needed to encourage reflection and self-evaluation. This is important, not just to promote professional voice or to advocate for the creation of some national professional forum, but to protect children and services. Thus we argue that without considering which systems work and professional voices that articulate how best to find a balance between systems and pedagogy, there is a danger that systems can become immune to failure. They are therefore not fully accountable to those who actually enact policy in the workplace.

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