Developing Reflective Early Years Practitioners within a Regulatory Framework

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Abstract

The government in England has committed to the reform of the children's workforce through 'a transformational reform agenda designed to improve life chances for all and reduce inequalities in our society' (DfES, 2006a). This agenda acknowledges that increasing the skills and competence of the workforce is critical to its success. This route to a more professional workforce includes the development of a new qualification the Early Years Sector–Endorsed Foundation Degrees leading to Senior Practitioner status and a new role of Early Years Professional. As a major open and distance-learning provider, The Open University is in a unique position to respond to the above agenda in providing flexible and accessible progression routes leading to higher-level qualifications for early years practitioners. However this reform is to be achieved through an increasingly centralised process underpinned by a 'standards agenda' (Moss, 2003a).

This paper provides a critical review of policy developments leading to the creation of two new workforce roles. It considers the implications of these roles for the professional development of early years practitioners and explores the relationship between the two roles. The second part of the paper describes the tensions and challenges involved in developing distance-learning courses which support students in becoming reflective practitioners whilst meeting externally prescribed standards and a requirement to demonstrate professional competence. The approach taken to enable students to reflect on their practice in the first work-based learning course in The Open University foundation degree in early years is discussed. Initial findings from the analysis of the final written assignments from students on this course suggest it offers possibilities for critical reflection and developing professionalism.

Abstrak

Kerajaan England komited untuk melakukan reformasi terhadap gunatenaga bagi kanak-kanak tadika melalui agenda reformasi transformasi yang direkabentuk untuk mempertingkatkan peluang

kehidupan untuk semua dan mengurangkan ketidaksamaan dalam masyarakat (DfES, 2006a). Agenda ini mengenal pasti bahawa peningkatan kemahiran dan kompetensi dalam gunatenaga adalah penting untuk kejayaannya. Laluan kepada gunatenaga yang lebih profesional termasuk pembangunan kelayakan baru melalui ijazah asas yang menjurus kepada status pengamal kanan dan peranan baru profesional bagi kanak-kanak tadika. Sebagai pembekal utama pembelajaran terbuka dan jarak jauh, The Open University berada dalam keadaan yang unik untuk bertindak balas kepada agenda tersebut dalam membekalkan kelayakan fleksibel yang membolehkan peningkatan kelayakan kepada paras tinggi untuk pengamal kanak-kanak tadika. Bagaimanapun reformasi ini perlu dijayakan melalui proses berpusat secara meningkat sepertimana yang dikehendaki oleh agenda piawai (Moss, 2003a).

Kertas kerja ini menyediakan satu ulasan yang kritikal terhadap pembangunan polisi yang menjurus kepada pembangunan dua peranan gunatenaga. Ia mempertimbangkan implikasi peranan-peranan ini untuk pembangunan pengamal kanak-kanak tadika dan meneroka hubungan antara kedua-dua peranan ini. Bahagian kedua kertas kerja ini menjelaskan ketegangan dan cabaran yang terlibat dalam membangunkan kursus jarak jauh yang menyokong pelajar untuk menjadi pengamal reflektif dan dalam masa yang sama memenuhi piawai luaran yang dikenakan dan keperluan untuk menunjukkan kompentasi profesional. Pendekatan yang diambil yang membolehkan pelajar membuat refleksi terhadap amalan mereka dalam kursus pembelajaran pertama berasaskan kerja di dalam ijazah asas Open University dibincangkan. Pendapat awal daripada analisis tugasan akhir yang ditulis oleh pelajar di dalam kursus ini mencadangkan bahawa ia menawarkan pelbagai kemungkinan untuk refleksi kritikal dan pembangunan profesionalisme.

Introduction and Background

The 'transformational reform agenda' (DfES, 2006a) in England recognises that increasing the skills, confidence and competence of the early years workforce is critical to providing quality provision for young children and their families. One outcome of this agenda has been the development of two new workforce roles discussed in this paper: the Senior Practitioner role and the Early Years Professional role. There have been many forces for change within the early years education and care sector in the last decade in England (Cohen et al., 2004; DfES, 2003;

DfES, 2004a). One major change is that all providers of early childhood services will be required to work to a new curricular framework, *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) for children from birth to five, to be in place by 2008 and currently under consultation (DfES, 2006b) (www.dfes.uk/consultations/). This draft is highly prescriptive and will lead to tighter government control and regulation of the early years curriculum (Moss, 2006); service providers will be required to be registered and inspected against a set of common standards. A new Early Years Professional role is closely tied into this development, in that over time only those with Early Years Professional status will be able to lead practice across the EYFS and the review of Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degrees in 2007–2008 is likely to tie the Senior Practitioner role more closely into this curriculum framework.

The Early Years Workforce: Training and Qualifications

In England (and the whole of the UK), there is confusing variation in the type and level of training required for working with young children and traditionally the early years workforce has been under qualified and poorly paid; qualifications range from unqualified to graduate/post graduate (Cohen et al., 2004). Recent figures show that 40% of the childcare/early years workforce are not qualified to level 2 (a basic level of training) and just 12% are qualified to level 4 or above (related to managerial level) (DfES, 2005a). Research shows that the quality of provision in early years settings is clearly linked to the quality of staff that work in them (Sylva et al., 2003). Workforce reform is therefore seen as crucial to providing quality services for children and parents (H.M.Treasury/DfES, 2004). At the centre of this reform process is a standard and target driven agenda to upskill and 'professionalise' the early years workforce. *A Common Core* of skills of knowledge and competence has been developed for all those who work with children, young people and families, to be taken account of in developing training and qualifications (DfES, 2005b). An *Integrated Qualifications Framework* (IQF) for the children's workforce is under development to promote the acquisition of skills and offer both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' career progression to enable work across professional boundaries.

This reform agenda in England is intended to enable workers at all levels to increasingly work in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency contexts, such

as Children's Centres. However, early years practitioners who seek to enhance their professional status will be working within an increasingly regulated environment. This raises questions about professional autonomy and what being a professional means within this new agenda (Oberheumer, 2005).

New Career Pathways for Early Years Professionals

As part of this workforce agenda, two new career pathways have been developed for early years practitioners in England, the Senior Practitioner role and the Early Years Professional role. For both roles, consultation and implementation has been carried out within relatively short and challenging timescales with little time for reflection.

The Senior Practitioner Role

The Senior Practitioner role was developed in 2001 for practitioners working directly with young children aged birth to eight. This status is achieved though an Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree, a vocational qualification designed to integrate academic study with work-based learning which has been endorsed by employer representatives as meeting workforce needs (DfES, 2001). This foundation degree provided a new level of professional practice and offered a progression route to graduate status or Qualified Teacher Status through employment-based and part-time routes. Students are required to meet a set of core learning outcomes based on national occupational standards for the sector, and to provide evidence of their work-based learning and practice. Guidance on content and delivery for providers is set out in a 'Statement of Requirement' (DfES, 2001) developed in consultation with key stakeholders. The 'Statement of Requirement' could be seen to fit Moss (2003b) description of a 'technicist' model of learning as the document sets out twelve core learning outcomes which students are required to demonstrate as an advanced practitioner. However the document also sets out the knowledge and understanding requirements alongside professional practice requirements. Providers are allowed considerable freedom to interpret these requirements providing they meet the conditions for sector-endorsement. Reflective practice is seen as a key focus by many providers (O'Keefe & Tait, 2004).

The Senior Practitioner role was largely welcomed as a sign of professional recognition for practitioners working with young children. However, five years on many issues remain unresolved, these include pay and conditions and the relationship of the role to the newly created Early Years Professional role. A recent government workforce consultation document recognises that Senior Practitioner status is problematic and states, "However, having taken the course, many graduates have now reached Level 4 (Level 5 under the new National Qualifications Framework) only to find no improvement in pay and conditions because there is no requirement on providers to employ those qualified to above Level 3 but below qualified teacher status (QTS) at Level 5 (now Level 6). We recognise the need to address this issue" (DfES, 2005a). Practitioners undertaking these foundation degrees have expressed similar concerns (O'Keefe & Tait, 2004).

At the time of writing the content of Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degrees is under review and the relationship of the Senior Practitioner role to the Early Years Professional role is being explored. However this leaves many foundation degree graduates and their employers in a state of uncertainty about the value and status of this role.

The Early Years Professional

The Government's national consultation on the future of the children's workforce highlighted the need to develop a group of people able to take on a new lead graduate professional role (DfES, 2005a). In the UK, teachers have typically been the lead professional in nursery schools and classes in the maintained sector, working mainly with children aged three to five, despite the fact that many are not trained to work with the youngest children (Blenkin & Yue, 1994) and early years teacher education courses do not cover the birth to three age range. Approximately 20,000 settings in the private and voluntary sector do not typically employ a teacher.

Two models of professional leadership were discussed in the consultation document: the European pedagogue model and the 'new' teacher emerging from New Zealand and Spain. The pedagogue role involves a holistic approach to working across a wide age range whilst the new teacher role is a less sweeping model and involves working directly with

children under five (Moss, 2003b). The government's response to the workforce consultation was to adopt a new 'Early Years Professional' role in 2006, which is more akin to the 'new' teacher than the pedagogue model and it is proposed will have equivalence to qualified teacher status. Early Years Professionals (EYPs) are required to meet a set of national standards at graduate level achieved through a combination of training and assessment routes or 'pathways' (CWDC, 2006). This role is closely tied to delivery of the new Early Years Foundation Stage as government intends that practitioners with early years professional status should be in all Children's Centres by 2010, and in every full day care setting by 2015.

The development of this new role has raised many issues. These include: the relationship of the role to qualified teacher status, the current lack of parity in pay and conditions, which are set out and agreed for teachers but are to be left to market forces for EYPs and the long term affordability of EYPs for service providers, once the initial 'Transformation Funding' is no longer available (CWDC, 2006). There is also an urgent need to clarify the relationship with this role and the Senior Practitioner role as increasing numbers of practitioners complete their foundation degrees.

Developing Early Years Professionals within Regulatory Frameworks?

The development of a more professional workforce through this reform agenda is not without its critics. Moss (2006), although referring more widely to early childhood institutions, challenges the view in England that what matters is what works and what can be measured and is sceptical that teaching and learning can be reduced to measurable technical outcomes. As noted above, the training and assessment routes for the Senior Practitioner role and subsequently the Early Years Professional role, reflect what Moss (2003b) has described as a 'technician' model of training, in that they are based on a standards framework and have nationally prescribed outcomes. Similarly Osgood (2006) argues that the 'regulatory gaze' stemming from such an agenda threatens the empowerment of early years practitioners. She voices concerns that the 'professionalism agenda' in England, rather than leading to a strengthened position for early years practitioners and increased respect for their work, could be used as a means of control and so inhibit professional autonomy. This links to Moss's (2006) discussion about the need for democratic practice in early childhood institutions.

The concept of 'democratic professionalism' is explored by Oberheumer (2005) as an alternative way of conceptualising professionalism in the face of increased control and regulation. This involves four levels of activity: interacting with children, centre management and leadership, partnership with parents and professional knowledge base. Osgood (2006) also argues for an alternative construction of professionalism, which acknowledges the complexity of work that early years practitioners do, to be achieved through education and training which includes going beyond technical competence and includes opportunities for critical reflection and consciousness raising.

Whilst acknowledging the constraints imposed by regulatory frameworks and externally imposed standards, both for practitioners and those charged with their professional development, in this paper we offer a different perspective on this reform agenda. This agenda can be seen as bringing to fruition many of the developments that those working in this field have striven for, for many years (Abbott & Pugh, 1998). It is opening up new routes to training and professionalism for a diverse and under qualified workforce, although not in the ways that authorities in the field would endorse (Osgood, 2006; Moss, 2006; Oberheumer, 2005). A pragmatic viewpoint, particularly for those concerned with implementing new training routes in England, is to adopt the stance implied by Osgood (2006) which is to explore the possibility for resisting and challenging the regulatory gaze. This stance places a responsibility on training providers to recognise their own agency in interpreting regulatory frameworks in creative ways. As Osgood (2006) notes, practitioners (*and providers*) (our italics), need not be passive recipients of the reform process, but can be active in rising to the challenge by negotiating where they are 'positioned and defined' and thus take on the role of autonomous professionals. Westcott (2004) offers a contrasting perspective on professionalism. Although she acknowledges that the definition of 'profession' is contested, she proposes that it might be applied to a community of practice that:

- exhibits command of a specialist body of knowledge.
- sets standards for practitioners.
- regulates its own standards of practice.

Westcott argues that standards are important for professionalisation, in that they assure a common baseline of practice and a common set of standards that can underpin professional registration, and which can then be monitored and regulated. This position offers possibilities in relation to the Senior Practitioner and Early Years Professional roles. The achievement of the standards that define these roles and the demonstration of a specialist body of knowledge and skills can arguably contribute to a sense of professional identity. Wenger (1998) proposes that an individual's sense of identity within a particular community of practice is influenced by engaging in certain experiences or practices. It is possible, therefore, to make the case that such experiences and practices might be encompassed in a set of professional standards.

In the second part of this paper we draw on the findings from an analysis of the final examination assignments of students following the first work-based learning course in the Open University Foundation Degree in Early Years (FDEY), to propose that it is possible for professionalism to be developed within the constraints of a regulatory framework and within what might be regarded as a 'technicist' approach to achieving professional status.

The Early Years Foundation Degree at the Open University

The Open University Sector-Endorsed FDEY commenced in 2003. It is offered part-time by supported distance learning. Students are drawn from practitioners working in a range of early years settings including home based (self-employed) childminders, nursery and pre-school staff, teaching assistants in schools and practitioners working in the new multi-disciplinary Children's Centres. Students study two 30 credit, knowledge-based courses and one, 60 credit, work-based learning course at Level 1. Students are expected to use the underpinning knowledge acquired from the knowledge-based courses as the basis for developing their practice in the work-based learning course. At Level 2, students choose from a number of optional courses and take a second 60 credit work-based learning course.

Oberheumer's (2005) concept of 'democratic professionalism', referred to above, includes four levels of activity: *Interacting with children, centre management and leadership, partnership with parents* and *professional*

knowledge base, and these are all encompassed within the course materials and work-based learning within the FDEY at the Open University. Researching the experience of a child in the setting is a central research theme of the second level work-based learning course. Recognising that children are social agents who can participate in, construct and influence their own lives, Oberheumer (2005) argues, is part of a professional disposition. Oberheumer also states that the concept of democratic professionalism relates well to a model of distributive leadership, which is an important theme within this second course. Partnership with parents permeates courses throughout the whole programme but is a specific feature of the first work based learning course as is developing students' own personal and professional knowledge.

It is students' perceptions of their learning on the first level 1 work-based learning course that is the focus of this paper. Although the course introduces some new material and ideas it focuses on helping students to work with what they already know in order to develop their own practice. It builds on the notion of 'reflective practice', introduced to students in the knowledge-based courses, to describe a way of approaching their work that involves questioning why and how they do something while they are actually doing it. The course aims to develop students' knowledge, understanding and skills to enable them to document and present evidence against twelve core learning outcomes. These are based on those contained in the Statement of Requirement (DfES, 2001). This document sets out the requirements for advanced skills practice for practitioners working in the early years care and education sector in England. The evidence is documented in a Practice Evidence File – a portfolio of their annotated evidence against the learning outcomes which also provides the source material for their analytical writing.

In the first part of the course students are introduced to a structured, four stage, Reflective Practice Cycle (RPC), to support them as they think about and question aspects of their practice within three core areas. These three areas of early years practice, referred to as themes in the course, include; working with parents and other professionals, promoting children's learning and development, and promoting children's rights and child protection. The four stage of RPC covers:

- Thinking about practice
- Exploring practice
- Reflecting on practice
- Documenting evidence

Students are encouraged to work through the RPC to help them explore, and begin to articulate, the 'hidden' values and beliefs that underpin their practice. A Three Layer model is utilised to represent the three layers of professional practice. At the top is Layer 1, the 'visible' layer that represents what they do in their day-to-day practice. Layer 2 is the 'explicit' and 'articulated' knowledge, values and beliefs that are used in talking about practice and has often been learnt from courses, reading, observations of others, experience and/or talking with colleagues. It is Layer 3, representing the usually hidden knowledge that is not readily articulated – comprising values and beliefs, hidden assumptions and ideas about child development, culture and society – that it is intended students will be able to expose and begin to articulate. The content of the courses and the activities the students are encouraged to carry out aims to help students to engage with this third layer. The 'Three Layer Model of Professional Practice' enables students to visualise the moving interactions between their day-to-day practice and how their knowledge, values and beliefs influence the ways in which they work with children and supports their understanding of the process of reflection.

Students submit written assignments relating to the three course themes at different points and a final assignment, part 1 of which is entitled 'Reflecting on my practice'. They are asked to reflect on their journey throughout the course and submit a reflective and analytical written account to demonstrate the development of their thinking and practice in relation to one of the course themes and one of the core learning outcomes. The evidence that they have assembled and documented in their Practice Evidence Files, as they worked through the stages of the RPC, should provide a rich source of data to draw on in their discussion. Students must also relate their reflective account directly to their own practice and show evidence of engaging with the course materials and wider reading. Other sections of this final assignment focus on students' professional development and explanations of the evidence they have for all twelve learning outcomes. The three part assignment is designed to

integrate the need for students to provide evidence against prescribed learning outcomes which are part of the regulatory framework (The Statement of Requirement referred to earlier) with demonstration of professional attributes and dispositions; in this case the ability to link theory and practice and reflect on their developing knowledge and understanding of their work with children and their parents.

The Study

In order to begin to evaluate the impact of the courses in the Open University Foundation Degree in Early Years on students' ability to reflect on their own learning and professional practice we analysed 63 reflective accounts written as the final assignment for the first work-based learning course during the academic year 2005. The scripts were selected on the basis that the 63 students had successfully completed the course and chosen to proceed to the final work-based learning course in 2006. To maintain anonymity and to protect the identity of the students, the scripts were all coded and individually numbered (1−63). They were then read independently by the three authors and the course themes and specific learning outcomes addressed noted. Drawing on a grounded theory approach, (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) examples of reflection relating to four emerging themes were identified by the authors:

- Validation or confirmation of practice;
- Challenges to or changes in values and beliefs;
- Changes in thinking and understanding;
- Changes in practice.

Thirty-nine students had chosen to focus on three learning outcomes which related closely to the three course themes. These were:

- Learning outcome 3: Work with other professionals (related to Theme 1: Working with parents and other professionals).
- Learning outcome 10: Enable children to participate confidently and effectively in activities (related to Theme 2: Promoting children's learning and development).

- Learning outcome 6: Assess and enhance the personal, social and emotional development of children (related to Theme 3: Promoting children's rights and child protection).

Five scripts relating to each of these three course learning outcomes were then randomly selected for further analysis in relation to the identified emerging themes.

The data presented in this paper is intended as the first stage in a longer study of these students' perceptions of the impact of their study on their practice and thinking. We are continuing to collect data through the use of questionnaires, telephone and focus group interviews and analysis of their final assignments for the Foundation Degree.

Student Perceptions

As discussed earlier defining what 'professionalism' looks like in the early years is the subject of much debate in the UK and elsewhere. The diverse profile of early years practitioners, the variety of work place settings, roles, resources and regulation that cover the age range (Blenkin & Yue, 1994; Moss & Penn, 1996) has made it difficult for agreement to be reached on what should constitute a corpus of professional knowledge. However, reflection on practice is generally recognised as an important component in developing professional and pedagogical knowledge, understanding and practice (Menmuir & Hughes, 2004; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). As with other foundation degrees for early years practitioners the Open University Foundation Degree "enables students to learn by examining attitudes, perceptions and realities relating to their own practice in the workplace" (O'Keefe & Tait, 2004). The first work-based learning course therefore seeks to stimulate the process of reflection from the starting point of students' practice, in the belief that encouraging students to examine what they currently do, to explore why they do things as they do, and their underpinning values and beliefs, will initiate a process through which they can begin to articulate and bring about changes in their practice.

The validation of existing ideas, understandings, approaches and ways of working can be seen as an important pre-requisite for new learning in the workplace while at the same time supporting students' desire for further

professional development. One student drew upon the innovative work in the Italian nurseries of Reggio Emilia.

> "…I became interested in the Reggio Emilia approach which I found supported my own beliefs. I have always believed that the starting point for plans should be the individual child. This interest has led to me booking on to two Reggio Emilia seminar evenings. I look forward to using these to help me develop how I plan with children…" (p. 1)

Many students commented both explicitly and implicitly on how their study, the Three Layer model and the RPC had helped to expose implicit understandings, and to challenge their values and beliefs.

> "…Just by observing and analysing my practice relating to children's learning, I have become more aware of our images of children and how they relate to the learning theories. I have been able to articulate my day-to-day practice and thus my explicit knowledge. However the course materials have challenged my thinking enabling me to uncover implicit messages that have impacted upon my practice and influenced how I work with children…" (p. 29)

> "…I began [the course] relying heavily upon my own observations to assess a child's personal, social and emotional (PSE) development. However, by using the reflective practice cycle … I reflected upon how I may improve assessment procedures to gain a more 'holistic' view of the child. The evidence I gathered reflects a change in my practice, recognising the importance of seeking the parent's and colleagues' observations to gain a clearer insight into the needs of the child…" (p. 28)

The course content exposes students to theories, ideas and research that they may not have encountered previously. Students demonstrated how they had engaged with these theories and how they had influenced their thinking, understanding and practice.

> "…Exploring the theories presented in [the course] I can identify my thinking as being constructivist, based on my knowledge of the ideas of Piaget…Being aware of the social context in which a child learns and develops guides me towards the theories of socio-culturists. Although I aspire to articulate my beliefs in this area, I do not always evidence it in practice, and see this as a weakness to be addressed…" (p. 54)

Students also used their developing understanding of theoretical perspectives to explain their practice in supporting children's learning. The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) project (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002) produced a Framework for Effective Pedagogy which encompassed descriptions of pedagogy, practice and professional dimensions and suggested that: 'Professional thinking includes the ability to reflect on practice and to make informed decisions through well conceived examination and analysis of pedagogy'. (p. 5)

> "…I was able to promote Jake's learning by working alongside him and by giving him appropriate advice which enabled him to build his tower…in socio-cultural terms I was able to 'scaffold' Jake's learning through the 'zone of proximal development' learning by sharing my 'expertise' of placing the blocks sideways which enabled him to build steady tower, as this was something he could not do on his own…" (p. 41)

Moyles (2001) suggests that *professionalism* is related to "thinking about facets of one's role" and that "it requires high levels of professional knowledge coupled with self-esteem and self-confidence".

When describing the impact on their practice the students provide a number of examples which illustrate changes in the way they are interacting with children, their use of resources and the kinds of language they use with children. The excitement experienced by some practitioners as they engage in learning with children is infectious.

> "…a very simple way of describing how my thinking has altered is that only a few days ago when a child with special educational needs, used the paint brush to add paint to her paper over and over again and she continued to do this for a while but the paper was getting soaked – normally (i.e. before my studies) I would have stopped this child immediately making such a mess! Now, however, I immediately try to support the child and extend their ideas as well as I can. In this instance I quickly got some more sugar paper and put it on top of the child's painting which helped to soak up the paint, I did this four times and each time the little girl jumped up and down in delight – we ended up with 5 paintings in total all looking the same!..." (p. 20)

Students' developing pedagogical knowledge is underpinned by a developing understanding of and respect for children as learners which is reflected in changes in the provision for play and for decision making in some accounts. In these accounts students were focusing on the impact on their practice and examples focus on adult-child interactions but there is also evidence for some students' of a developing understanding of the need to hold back, to not intervene and to allow children time and space to explore their own solutions. Other students reflected on the choices that children are able to make in their settings.

> "…[The activity] assisted me in clarifying what rights I believe children should have, my list developed further as I became increasingly familiar with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I began thinking about my practice and how I promote children's rights and inclusion within my setting… It also provided the opportunity for me to reflect on the decisions I believe children should have a say in about their own lives…The children were being given the opportunity to make some choices…but I did feel this was an area that could be improved on…I have stopped the children working in set groups, they can choose who they want to work with…I have also begun to try free-flow inside/outside play/work…" (p. 18)

The investigations students carried out as part of their study of theme one involved interviews and questionnaires, which provided an opportunity for them to enter into dialogues with colleagues. For some students this had a direct impact on their practice in working with parents.

> "…After the investigation I decided to write a clear statement on Parental Involvement. Up to then I had always used a daily diary but sort of assumed parents knew what they were and how they could be used…" (p. 1)

> "…After discussions with colleagues it became evident that we were not empowering parents with the choice of the type of parental involvement…I helped to introduce a new induction day…" (p. 28)

The activities also supported students in gaining the confidence to explore and develop relationships with colleagues both within and outside their own setting (in this case a home based carer).

> "…I have more confidence when dealing and speaking with the many professionals I meet. Becoming a reflective practitioner has enabled me to more confidently reveal my practice to others…During the last 6 months I have also shared my knowledge and experience as a Support Childminder…For example I have been asked about how to write policies for their [other childminders] settings and I have been able to ensure that they write them actively promoting children's rights…" (p. 9)

As with any prepared course (and perhaps more so in the case of distance learning courses which are presented in a printed format and have to be prepared well in advance of students' studying them) the content is selected and influenced by the authors' and course designers' underpinning values and beliefs – it is not and can not be value free. This is a dilemma in developing work based learning courses that form part of distance learning programmes. There is an obvious danger that students will absorb the presented ideas as 'truths' especially if they are new to higher education study and have few opportunities to engage in critical reflection and discussion. The way information is presented, and the opportunities provided for students to engage in critical reflection of course content, theory and research, and their own and others' practice therefore became a critical element in course design. One approach the course utilises is a period of compulsory computer mediated discussion between tutors and students.

The use of the notion of a 'community of understanding' (Anning & Edwards, 1999) which could be seen as a stage in a process towards developing a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) is one that would seem to fit well with the experience of students on this course. Many work alone as childminders or feel relatively powerless in their positions, for example teaching assistants in schools. The conferencing provided opportunities, for students to engage with and support one another in discussion, debate and learning.

> "…I have found the computer conferencing extremely useful in focusing thoughts and discussing various ideas. I have also been able to help several colleagues with a variety of queries. I have found this element of the course very thought provoking. It has meant I have had access to different views on subjects but have been able to discuss and explain them so that others appreciate their views even if they do not agree…" (p. 21)

Edward's (2000) 'view of practice as informed action carried out by professionals who demonstrate dispositions to interpret their settings in particular ways and select responses to their interpretations' would appear to relate closely to the situation that students on work-based courses are in. She suggests that 'If research based knowledge is to influence practice it has to become part of the constant cycle of interpretation and response…'. Our data would seem to indicate that through repeatedly working through the lenses of the RPC and the Three Layer model students have begun to see the benefits of these as tools for considering and evaluating their learning and their practice. They are learning to foreground their beliefs and values and to articulate where there is a mismatch between these, their knowledge and understanding of theory and research, and their practice. Interrogating their practice in this way leads them to take action to bring about change in their own practice, and in some instances, to the practice in their settings (Moyles, 2001; Edwards, 2004).

Conclusion

The different starting points for students in terms of their professional knowledge, understanding and skills and the variety of different settings they are working in and their unique cultural configurations in terms of underpinning values and beliefs, working relationships, pedagogic practices and possibilities must be acknowledged. What is innovative practice in one setting may well be commonplace in another. What is considered 'good practice' is often defined in terms of externally derived indicators or developmental checklists and students in early years settings are constrained by the, often powerful, discourses operating through the policy and guidance documents produced by governments and agencies. What these accounts begin to show is practitioners' willingness to engage with new ideas, to explore their values and beliefs, to try new ways of working with children, parents and other professionals and to articulate the changes that are taking place. Interestingly the accounts were overwhelmingly positive about the process of reflection, even if workplace constraints meant they felt they were able to effect little change. Tutor feedback, and student comments in the electronic conferencing indicate that many students had found the process of reflection difficult but by the time students wrote their final accounts for this assignment they were able to reflect on the challenges to their thinking and to provide some powerful examples of the impact on their practice.

In this paper we have suggested that the course team at the Open University have not seen themselves as passive recipients of the process of reform (Osgood, 2006) who deliver pre-specified curricula, but as active agents who have developed courses which acknowledge the complex work that early years practitioners do. Despite the constraints of the overarching regulatory framework, the model of education and training within the Open University Foundation Degree in Early Years extends beyond just enabling students to demonstrate technical competence against a set of standards. As evidence from our research shows, the course provides these students with opportunities for critical reflection and consciousness raising in relation to their workbased practice and professional development. As one student noted, "At the end of the course, I can see how I am more secure in my confidence as a reflective practitioner. This has enhanced my professionalism which makes me feel good about my practice".

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