The factors that influence early years educator's professional agency.

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Literature Review

The early years profession has seen radical historical change in response to the transformation of public services enacted through government agenda, with the aim to improve outcomes for children (Hordern, 2013). Key reviews including the Nutbrown Review, focused on educator qualifications to enhance quality (Nutbrown, 2012) and changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS, DfE, 2012) placed emphasis on preparing children for school and raising quality and standards across the sector. However, research conducted by Blanden et al. (2017) argues that qualifications have a limited association with quality and children's educational outcomes and makes comparisons to the literature focused on measuring teacher quality, it is recognised that teacher quality matters but the concept is not mediated by observable characteristics such as qualifications, suggesting a broader focus on skills and attributes should be considered. Smith (2012) argues that framework, government and societal changes have narrowed the focus of early years education and that this has had a detrimental impact on the holistic aspects of early years education and the agency and identity of the early years educator. Moreover, highlights that the early years workforce receives low pay and a lack of recognition in terms of professional status can undermine the motivation of practitioners and impact on practitioner's agency. Recent qualitative research carried out by Bury et al. (2020) found that poor pay progression and low salaries, which were felt to be incompatible with increasing workload and responsibilities stopped many from seeing working in the early years as a long-term career option. Moreover, a lack of social recognition afforded to early years education, which staff felt society wrongly viewed as being "easy" and had a negative impact on their professional identity. A recommendation from the report improving worker pay are also proposed, including matching early years pay with that of primary teachers. The report also calls for the government to consider a review of current training qualifications, to ensure staff are equipped with key skills for the job and maintain motivation in their practice. The research findings suggest that quality educators should

possess 'hard' and 'soft' skills and identify experience, adaptability, communication skills and resilience key elements. Agency or professional identity is not identified or discussed in the report findings and supports the focus for this study that this is a gap in the research aimed at understanding agency in practice (Bury et al 2020). It could be argued that a focus on the skill and qualifications of educators alone, is too narrow and places limits on the development of agency and professional identity in practice.

Agency is defined by Arndt et al. (2020) as the ability to identify goals and have the power to act to make change. Agency is viewed as a variable used to understand or explain a social action. Priestly et al. (2015) argue that the term agency suggests an innate capacity, something that an individual possess. Biesta and Tedder (2006) recognise agency as freedom to act with autonomy, independent of constraints within surrounding structures. The notion and conceptualisation of agency has been contested in literature and continues to be a source of confusion in social thought. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) highlight that agency is often discussed in the context of structure - agency debates with the view that factors related to contexts and environments surrounding the individual control the level of the individual's agency. The framing of the debate was contributed to by the work of Bourdieu (1997) and his notion of habitus, recognising socially ingrained habits, dispositions, skills, perceptions and reactions individuals possess that shape their identity. These are related to their social world and have a direct impact on the reproduction of the structures around them. However, Archer (2020) argues that there is a gap in the current literature and theory to recognise and place value on agency, independent of structure and as a concept to analyse in its own right. Archer (2020) discusses agency in the context of ownership of one's own actions and evaluating the success of the outcomes. Furthermore, possessing the power to transform, placing the focus on the individual rather than the structures around them. However, Priestly et al. (2015) caution against taking a simplistic view of agency that is focused solely on the capacities of an individual and put forward the view that agency should be recognised as ecological, emergent and enacted through environmental influences. Moreover, propose that agency is best understood as something that is achieved, based on experiences from the past that is enacted in the present. Therefore, Priestley et al. (2015) argues that context should be valued as it may serve to inhibit or enable levels of agentic capacity. Moreover, to recognise that experiences individuals have in the present will impact in the future. This point is important because it could suggest that within the context of

early years education, educators' experiences in practice are shaping their sense of professional identity and agency and that these factors will have implications for their future practice. Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological systems theory supports the point and places context at the forefront and provides a framework to understand and analyse in the bi-directional power forces of wider influences impacting on the educator and their agency in practice. Consequently, Chalk (2013) argues that this should be a clear area of focus for policy makers seeking to develop and enhance the quality of early years education and understand the factors influencing the workforce. In addition, supports the point made by Blanden et al (2017) that considering educators qualification level alone as a measure of quality in the workforce in insufficient. Mistry and Sood (2012) expand on the point and considered the pathways for educators to move into leadership roles, their research highlighted the importance of a focus on understanding and embedding the early years culture, context and reflective practice to shape effective educators with a strong sense of professional identity, rather than the qualification level of the educator.

The concept of a professional and professionalism in the context of the early education field is recognised as a complex and changing phenomenon, socially constructed located in historical and social situations (Brock, 2012). Mevawalla and Hadley (2012) argue that the key to professionalism is an educator's ability to reflect on one's professional roles and to be able to define what their own sense of professionalism and professional identity encompasses. Lasky (2015) make direct links to educators' professional identity in her exploration of the definition of agency related to describing factors including individual beliefs, knowledge, norms, language and emotional well-being as key components that shape professional identity and in turn influence educator agentic capacity. Research conducted by Murray and McDowall Clark (2012) found that the traditional notions of leadership in early years practice are at odds with the ethos of early years education and care. The qualitative studies found that leadership approaches are underpinned by personal morals and a 'passion to care' that drives agency in practice. It could be suggested that the recognition of emotional well-being and passion is underpinned with the humanistic theoretical approach of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968, cited in McInerey, 2013) highlighting that educators have emotional connections to their role that could enable or inhibit agency in practice. Research carried out by Brock (2012) highlighted the complexities in the understanding of practitioner professional identity as a concept. The research aimed

to elicit the thinking of twelve early years educators employed in the early education sector in England using interviews. The study focused on gaining the educators perspectives on the complexities of their roles and their reflections on professional ideologies, identity and personal voice. The research findings highlighted that the participants found it difficult to give a definition of their professional identity and that the descriptions they provided were broad and complex. Responses included links to their qualifications, experiences in their professional career and responses to children's needs. Anning (2005) suggests practitioners are not used to be asked what they feel and know and often revert back generalised information from policy and documentation. The skills required for interprofessional practice were highlighted alongside team working skills. When recognising their values and ethics all of the participants discussed the tensions of providing care and education to children and referred to their own principles that underpin their practice. A key finding from the study was that the participants all discussed their professionalism situated in the immediate context of their own settings and community and used this to evidence their practice (Brock, 2012). The point supports the previously discussed work of Priestley et al. (2015) and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological systems theory, recognising the influence of the environment, community and context the educator is part of. Osgood (2004) states that professionals working with young children are perceived to heighten their professional identity by being committed, making personal sacrifices and investing emotions, suggesting that their professionalism is bound up in their values and beliefs established from a professional knowledge base and a belief that their professional identity forms as their role is a vocation. The finding suggests support for the view of Bourdieu (1997) and the notion of habitus, the perceptions, dispositions and views are socially and culturally constructed and ingrained in the individual. The findings from the study did highlight that the participants recognised they responded to the needs of children and indicates agency. However, none of the findings made specific reference to a sense of agency, the participants did not discuss autonomy, evaluating their own actions or acting to change their practice when discussing their professional identity.

In contrast, research conducted by Ortlipp et al. (2011) aimed to explore the discourses surrounding professional identity by conducting research using interviews with twenty-eight early years educators. The findings highlighted the following key words the participants used when defining their professional identity, 'play', 'teaching',

'learning' and 'care'. It could be argued that the key words used mirror the EYFS DfE, 2017) framework, with a focus on a play-based curriculum, teaching and learning. Moreover, supports the point made by Anning (2005) suggesting that educators revert to policy and documentation to define aspects of their professional identity. Less than half of the participants identified the importance of reflection as part of their professionalism and professional identity and that this allowed for the recognition of where changes were needed in their practice that they could act upon. Moreover, suggests the participants seek to exercise power within their role and links to Arndt et al. (2020) definition of agency, to act to make change and to achieve.

Free entitlement to early education for children became universal in 2004 and since then Government has aimed to improve quality and raise standards by upskilling the workforce and by direct inspection. All early years settings are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) who make judgments of a settings quality in relation to the delivery of the EYFS Framework (DfE, 2021). The Department for Education have revised the EYFS to be adopted into practice in September 2021 and identify two key aims of the revision, to improve children's outcomes in relation to literacy and language at age five, and to reduce the workload and unnecessary paperwork for educators to allow increased time to be spent with children (DfE, 2021). Included in the framework is the requirement for educators to use their 'professional judgment' linked to making assessments of children's learning. However, Osgood (2006) argues that the act of making judgments is heavily influenced by the context and frameworks educators are working within. Osgood (2006) claims that in the United Kingdom, early years educators are subject to disempowering regulatory gaze in the name of quality and high standards of practice, promoted by the Government through policy that is focused on educational and economic achievement which, in practice, is narrowing the early years curriculum. The work of Foucault (1978) on 'disciplinary technologies' and 'normalising technologies' places focus on the use of power by authorities, in this case the Government, to regulate the behaviours of the educators who are the subordinates and become docile bodies yielding to the discourse of early years educator professionalism. Mahony and Hextall (2000) agree and state that regulation has led to a climate of accountability, performativity and the creation of standardised approaches in practice. Moreover, threatening educator capacity to act with autonomy and agency. The work of Bell (2010) supports the point and reiterates the previously discussed work of Anning (2005) and Bourdieu's (1997)

habitus theory, but describes the concept of 'enacted fantasy' and 'ventriloquism' to suggest that consequently, educators 'perform', work to policy they may not believe in or feel able to challenge. However, Goodfellow (2004) argues that regulation can be resisted, negotiated or challenged by educators who have developed self-awareness and self-confidence but raises the issue that in practice, opportunities for continuous professional development are often focused on the development of specific skills rather than a critical self-evaluation or reflection focused on personal attributes and development, leading to an educator focusing solely on 'what they do' to perform their role, rather than 'who they are' and their identity.

However, research conducted by Brogaard Clausen (2015) compared curricula in relation to the concepts of schoolification and democracy between England and Denmark. The Nordic/Danish tradition of democracy in early years pedagogy has been highly promoted and regarded as inspirational, but has led to a resistance within the sector to the involvement of external political influence. However, regulatory bodies have emerged in the early years sector with the roles evolving from providing a perspective of a 'critical friend' to devising learning plans for children that are to be followed and evaluated in practice. Brogaard Clausen (2015) suggest that the key issues in Denmark are that due to the democratic approach, educator professional identify and agency is hindered because educators do not recognise their own importance as a professional and therefore, do not take enough of a lead with children's learning. In support of the point, research conducted by Albin-Clark (2020) suggests that regulation and policy lead to the effective use of documentation to evidence both practice and children's learning, moreover enhance practitioner identity and agentic capacity. Furthermore, recognises documentation as agentic and influential when its actions are foregrounded in context and environment. Albin-Clark (2020) frames his perspective in line with the work Barad (2007) and argues that through educator intra-action with documentation a methodological tool can be created based on the responses to impact on learning and changes in pedagogical practice, hence the pedagogy is then inclusive of the material and holds agentic capacity. The work is important for this research study as it suggests that documentation in practice, as an outcome of regulation and statutory requirements, could serve and be viewed as producing empowering and helpful effects for educators, the documentation occupies physical space where intra-actions emerge that invite human senses of belonging and value. The diversity in the views of educators in relation to regulation is

highlighted in research conducted by Fenech and Sumsion (2007), responses from interviews with early years educators working in day care provision highlighted that some felt that intent/process of regulatory and statutory documentation aligned with their own values and pedagogy, empowering them in their practice and providing them with a positive sense of professional identity. All participants demonstrated their awareness of resistance to the power of regulatory bodies that negatively impact on their agency in practice. However, the work of Foucault (1978) proposes that where there are power forces there is resistance, and the act or thoughts of resistance demonstrates agentic capacity. Responses from the educators when discussing regulation in practice from policy makers included 'protection for the workforce', 'policy needs to be interpreted correctly to meet the needs of children', 'it supports reflection' and 'you need to have the will to think around it to apply it to practice'. The findings echo that of the research carried out by Brooker et al in 2010 with the focus to explore practitioner's experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the qualitative study used the method of interviews and focus groups and the participants ranged from practitioners to leaders. Overall, the findings suggested that the participants felt that the EYFS (DfE,2008) framework contributed to the 'professionalism of the workforce', the participants recognised they used the framework daily to plan, deliver and assess children's learning and reinforced their own ideas of quality practice. Moreover, suggesting the framework empowered the in their practice. However, it could be argued that the focus on the research was on what the participants do, rather than who they are. Supported in the previously discussed thoughts of Goodfellow (2004).

The implementation of the EYFS (DfE 2021) is inspected by Ofsted using the education inspection framework and revisions to the framework were made in April 2021. A clear focus is a move away from data gathering and paperwork to enhance educator agency in practice. An overview of research to support an evidence-based approach, was published by Ofsted (2019) and highlighted that educator well-being and high levels of self-efficacy are key factors to empower agency. In addition, the research identified that educators felt that leaders and relationships within setting played a key role in empowering educators to practice with autonomy and confidence (Sellen, 2016). The point is echoed in the Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector (ELEYS) study (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006) that stated educators felt empowered in their practice when there is strong leadership in the setting with a clear

vision and ethos. Moreover, facilities positive relationships between themselves, as leaders and the educators they lead.

In conclusion, the review of the literature highlights the complexity when defining and understanding the concept of professional identity and recognition is placed on the emotional connections of the educator and the tensions between the education and care of children, impacting on professional identity and the concept of professional. The work of Priestly et al (2015) puts forward the need to consider that educators experiences in their practice are shaping their sense of agency, with implications for future practice. Furthermore, suggesting that it is imperative to consider wider contextual and environmental influences. It is evident that that regulatory and statutory bodies heavily influence practice and practitioner agency. However, a diverse view of opinion has been presented within the literature to consider if these bodies inhibit or empower practitioner agency. The influence of leadership, positive relationships and a vision and ethos are factors that have been highlighted as empowering and influential in shaping a positive professional identity and enhancing agentic capacity. However, continue to intersect with external and internal influences within practice.

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