A Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner - Working Together, Cross National Perspectives on Professionalism

An International Research Collaboration of members of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA)
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Introduction

• A cross national project involving members of a Special Interest Group (SIG) on Professionalism, within EECERA.
• Over a five year period the group has been involved in discussion, meetings, conference presentations and journal papers and an accepted book proposal for 2010.
• We have sought to articulate what we mean by terms such as ‘profession’, ‘professional’ and professionalism’, in relation to early years practitioners working in different cultures and contexts (Dalli & Urban, 2008).
Introduction contd.

• The ‘Day in the Life’ (DiL) Project aimed to explore the notion of professionalism with an individual practitioner, each working in an early childhood setting across six countries, Australia, England, Finland, Germany, New Zealand and Sweden.

• The England project has been funded throughout by the PBPL CETL.

• A common set of questions provided the framework and some structural equivalence for the project, but across different contexts.
Research Questions

These questions provided the aims of the project which were to explore:

- what it means to act professionally in a particular context;
- perceptions of what being a ‘professional’ in early childhood means - including practitioners’ self perceptions and external perspectives;
- common features of practice in each context.
Methodological Framework

• The project group adopted a qualitative case study approach as an efficient way to make full use of limited resources (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 2001).

• Allowed for investigating the specific conditions within which early years practitioners were working in different countries.

• Consistent with our intention of exploring meanings about professionalism within the practitioners’ individual experience of their role but also to learn about commonalities.
Methodological Framework contd.

• Practitioner recruited as a ‘convenience sample according to agreed criteria
• Each participant wrote a ‘contextualising description’ of their country and the research setting
• Participants gathered a day’s data using video supplemented by field notes
• Each practitioner interviewed about their day and their views on ‘professionalism’
• Each participant produced a case study and sought to emerge some key themes.
Working together

- Project presented logistical challenges for a group of researchers working across six countries.
- **2005:** Idea presented to the SIG group at pre-conference meeting in Dublin - six countries eventually participated.
- **2005-2006:** Project outline and methodology developed by project leaders and agreed at 2006 EECERA conference in Iceland.
- **2006-2007:** Phase 1 of the project (data gathering) and project co-directors meetings in Europe.
Working together contd.

- **2007 Prague**: Dissemination of Phase 1 and the planning of Phase 2
- **2008 Norway**: further dissemination
- **2009 Strasbourg**: final dissemination-drawing on book structure.
A community of practice

- Evolved a way of working which fitted Wenger’s (2009) notion of a community of practice

- Embraced the three main elements - the domain, the community and the practice.
A community of practice contd.

- **Shared domain** - exploring the notion of professionalism from a theoretical and practice perspective to clarify understandings of how professionalism as a phenomenon is locally constructed (Dalli and Urban, 2008).

- We fitted Wenger’s notion of a **community** as one in which, “Members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that help them to learn from each other”.
A community of practice contd.

• **Practice** - we were a group of people who, “develop[ed] a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (Wenger, 2009 p. 2).

• We acknowledged that each participant needed to tell their own country story and to reflect upon what has been learnt.
Summary

- The ‘DIL’ project - a collection of free standing but related case studies which share a common conceptual and methodological framework.
- Gillen et. al (2007) recognise the impossibility of direct comparisons across cultures - the project group was clear that this was not their aim.
- Penn (1998) - cannot be straightforward matching of experiences because of the parameters under which research in each country is conducted, “all that is possible is to listen to the separate voices and try to hear their stories” (p. 14).
- Project aimed to give voice to the practitioners working in each of the six countries but also to look for some common themes and elements. The focus has been on eliciting meanings within each context and then sharing what we have found (Tobin et. al, 1998).