

Participatory concepts of multidisciplinary/professional working on an Early Childhood Studies degree course in the UK

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore democratic values in higher education pedagogies, as related to an Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree course in an English university. It seeks to find out what constitutes a multi-disciplinary course from both student and tutor perspectives. It is contextualised by the concepts of participation embedded in the idea of multi-professional team work, in order to establish how these ideas could contribute a strong ethical focus to the concept of multi-disciplinary study. The study was designed within the paradigm of participatory action research and findings suggest that, although students make links between different disciplinary discourses, tutors feel that their professional identity and knowledge can be constrained by the course structure. The paper suggests that more work needs to be done on the validation of early childhood courses to allow opportunities for multi-professional working to be modelled.

Key words: *multi-disciplinary; participation; higher education*

Introduction

This paper reports on an evaluative study of an Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree course in an English university which is designed to equip students for a future in a multi-professional early years workforce. The paper raises questions about the role of higher education in promoting both multi-disciplinary and participatory concepts of team work for future early years professionals. 'Inter-agency' work has been promoted in England with regard to policies about young children (DCSF 2008), in response to the *Victoria Climbié Enquiry Report* (HM Government 2003). The ECS course reflects these developments, as articulated in the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) policy agenda (DFES 2004), through a modular structure which includes education, safeguarding and health approaches to the study of childhood. Additionally, there is a fourth strand which represents participatory approaches to work with children. In the first two years of the course students undertake four 30 credit modules, each module reflecting one of the four strands. The participation strand aims to present themes such as constructions of childhood, concepts of participation and listening to children (author 2009) as well as raising questions about the participation of adults in services for children. The study was therefore undertaken within this strand with the second year student cohort and specifically aimed to reinforce a

participatory perspective on multi-professional working. It also included the perspectives of tutors from a range of professional backgrounds who taught on the other ECS modules within the other professional strands outlined above. To make sense of the apparently synonymous terms used in relation to services working together, I suggest that the use of 'inter' or (in current use) 'trans', rather than 'multi', in relation to 'agency', 'professional' and 'disciplinary' suggests services where differences are minimized. However, because I contend that there is still considerable work to do to achieve joint, let alone combined, working practices, I maintain use of the term 'multi' in this paper. Since the focus of the paper is on higher education, the term 'multi-disciplinary' is used to distinguish the pedagogical from the fieldwork implications of multi-professionalism.

Rationale for a participatory approach to multi-professionalism

Pedagogical approaches to Early Childhood Studies courses provide important messages, not only for students' approach to learning in general, but also as formative experiences which influence future professional behaviour. Miller, Freeman and Ross (2001) outline some of the understandings that students need, in order to be prepared for multi-professional working in the health and social care fields. These include an understanding of how group beliefs, and thus 'team cultures', develop, implying that, to work successfully in a multi-professional context, students need to gain the skills and rationale for 'working together'. This perspective was urged ten years ago by Glisson and Hemmelgarn who stated:

'Efforts to improve children's services systems should focus on positive organizational climates rather than on increasing inter-organizational services coordination. Many large-scale efforts to improve children's services systems have focused on inter-organizational coordination with little success and none to date have focused on organizational climate (1998, 401).

In line with this focus, the rationale for the study reported here was to investigate student and tutor interpretations of a participatory team work aspect of multi-disciplinary/professional working (a micro-analytical approach) within the context of the wider range of issues of significance in a complex coordinated organization (a macro-analytical approach). In this case, the organizational issues relate to the design of an Early Childhood Studies course, which was analysed as a particular model of multi-disciplinary venture. In recent years Anning et al (2006) have developed the macro-analytical approach to early years services by identifying four types of dilemmas for multi-agency team working: structural, inter-professional, procedural and ideological dilemmas. I propose that a participatory approach to team-work has particular relevance to themes related to the latter three categories and that these categories can also be utilized to examine the pedagogical implications of multi-agency working. For example, inter-professional dilemmas cause anxiety and role uncertainty and are related to the development of

professional identity. Procedural dilemmas include issues of hierarchy which threaten equitable working relationships and relate to *political understandings*. Finally, ideological dilemmas encompass cultural views of team work, in terms of how language and norms are connected with different professional groups, and are related to *communities of practice*, including how students learn about or are inducted into multi-professional ways of working. Relevant literature will therefore be considered under these three headings.

Political understandings

The major difficulties encountered in multi-professional working often centre on issues of hierarchy. Morrow et al (2005), in their study of a Sure Start local programme, found that power relationships and lack of authority constrained some staff from expressing opinions. This suggests that there is a tension between the responsibility carried by positions of authority and the flexibility which Mandy (1996) identified as needed to overcome structural obstacles and achieve inter-disciplinary working. These barriers are particularly salient when social processes demand a managerialist approach or the dominance of some professions, such as medicine (Hugman 1995).

Moss (2006) explores this in more depth and identifies a core issue for the early years workforce as the tendency for dominant discourses (such as, I suggest, a medical paradigm) to promote technical, rather than political and ethical solutions to workforce development. He also points to the differences in status and pay between different categories of workers, as well as the gendered nature of the early years workforce, and suggests that it should be the workers and the communities they work in which promote and 're-envision' (2006, 39) early years work. In this vein, Warin (2007) emphasises children's contribution to the ideal of integrated early years services and suggests that a socio-cultural approach to child development (for example, Rogoff, 1991) can supply a framework for understanding interdependence in the case of child and carer. Therefore, a participatory ethic for developing early years services is advocated by both Moss (2006) and Warin (2007). Importantly, in the context of a study of pedagogy, both of these authors argue that this ethic should be applied equally to both children and adults involved in early years services.

In his work on early childhood education (2005), Moss makes reference to Young's (2000) work on deliberative democracy. This approach to democratic theory is useful for developing an inclusive understanding of participation that allows for a range of voices to be listened to. Thus 'greeting, rhetoric and narrative' (2000, 7) rather than a more narrow and rational approach to discussion are all styles which should be listened to for their diverse expressions of collective ideas. This extends the boundaries of participatory debate to include much more prominently the perspectives of children, their families and different professional groups.

This widening of the understanding of participatory democracy to encompass the contributions of a range of differently articulate participants has implications for the education of early childhood students. It means that they should learn that different perspectives must be

considered regardless of the status and ability of the participant. Nevertheless, the issue of differing professional identities also has to be negotiated because students often come to university with assumptions about professional fields and the existing differentiated structures which they encounter.

Professional identity

Morrow et al (2005) identified professional anxiety, often linked to hierarchical issues, as an issue in their study of an inter-professional team. In the field of early childhood, Oberhuemer (2004) states that professional identity is often influenced by the dominant discourse of developmental psychology which has formed most of the content of training courses, with cultural politics taking up less room. The ECS course in this study attempts to redress the balance of these different disciplinary discourses, by evenly distributing the foci of social work, health and education. Thus, developmental psychology has its place but is not dominant overall.

Nevertheless, there are other discourses which are dominant in professionalism besides disciplinary ones. Moss (2006, 38) places professionalism in line with an 'increasing regulation of managerial regimes'. This means that the professional as, for example, a researcher or democratic practitioner is marginalized and that participatory practices are excluded at the multi-professional level. To demonstrate this, in the context of an early years integrated care and education initiative, Broadhead and Armistead (2006) noted that differing and distinct professional identities were best preserved by shared goals within a context of management groups that were non-hierarchical.

Robinson et al (2005) and Easen et al (2000) conclude that professional learning is a central tenet for the development of multi-agency working. This is because, if systems are to be transformed, there are significant demands on traditional ideas of professional identity. This suggests that the initial education and training of future professionals also needs to address notions of identity, a task which could be achieved by problematising traditional professional boundaries. Supporting the view that professional education matters, Freeman et al (2000) talk about how individual philosophies influence approaches to team work in the health field. Thus, for example, in their study, those with an 'integrative' approach to team work understood the importance of appreciating the rationale for the functioning of other professions. Miller et al (2001) support this by asserting that teams need to build knowledge about themselves, as well as a sense of historical context and background. The development of communities of practice is one way that education can take place to support such flexibility.

Communities of Practice

The issue of identity, as we have seen, cannot be fully explored without recourse to the structures which inform it, in terms of the collective context of the work /study place and the joint understandings which support a sense of team membership.

To achieve a conceptual understanding of how collectivity in the work place influences practice, Sachs (2001) draws on the idea of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) in relation

to teaching students, to identify how the work place inducts and educates new members through experience of everyday practices and 'culture'. Sachs (2001, 158) suggests that communities of practice are vital to an activist identity which centres on 'respect, reciprocity and collaboration' and like Moss (2006) she states that professionalism itself needs challenging and redefining to avoid latent elitism. She sees the community of practice, supported by Bernstein's (1996) concept of 'prospective' identity, emerging from a social movement, as a catalyst for the promotion of a democratic discourse.

However, Wenger's model (1998) does not easily encompass the complexity of identity in a multi-professional context, whereas Engestrom's activity theory (2001), which draws from the multi-professional field of health, fits the diversity of new organizational paradigms better, and makes situations which are contradictory into positive learning opportunities. The idea of the 'conflictual questioning' of existing standard practice is at the heart of Engestrom's theory (2001), which attempts to oppose the fragmented approaches to care which separate into either everyday or scientific practices. Activity theory, therefore, promotes learning in the workplace through openness to questioning leading to informal learning. Boud and Middleton (2003) suggest that this learning then needs to be made visible for the learners to gain maximum benefit.

In summary, therefore, by exploring how various strands or professional disciplines intersected and aligned in a non-fragmented way within an example of a 'multi-disciplinary' ECS course, the study reported below adopted the paradigm suggested by Engestrom (2001). A further aim was that of improving the pedagogical approaches and dissemination to students about the participatory potential of multi-professional working. A third aim was to bring tutors together in the democratic endeavour to make meaning of this aspect of the course. Thus, the research questions were:

- What are student/ staff interpretations of this example of a multi-disciplinary course?
- Can the ECS course be characterised as having a participatory approach to multi-professionalism?

Methodology and methods

The study fell within a paradigm of participatory action research and university ethical approval was sought before the study commenced. Sixty students and six tutors took part. Data from the students was collected in a series of focus groups during which posters were produced in response to six questions. The questions focused on the links students were making between modules from different disciplinary strands and their understanding of multi-professional working in general. Data collection with the six tutors involved individual semi-structured interviews which focused on their own professional backgrounds and thoughts about the meaning of and design of a multi-disciplinary course. The researcher undertook an initial thematic analysis of the poster responses and then volunteers from the two groups of participants separately engaged in data analysis in order to verify and assist in identifying continuities as well

as discontinuities within the data. Thus, there was a grounded and participatory approach to data analysis and the study simultaneously explored and enhanced the idea of a participatory approach to multi-disciplinary/ professional working. In line with an action research approach, the study was also intended to inform current practice and provide useful information for a forthcoming course revalidation. As such, there was regular feedback to colleagues and department managers about the findings.

Findings

Student perspectives

The student groups commented on the messages they derived from the course as a whole and the links they made between modules. In general, the messages they reported echoed many of the course aims, citing aspects of the education, safeguarding and health module handbooks. Many students also commented on the vocational aspect of the course suggesting that ‘working with children’ and ‘qualifications’ were important. The word ‘work’ occurred in 20% of the responses and most modules were strongly linked to a profession, though the participation module was seen as more ambiguous and linked to either being a practitioner or a researcher. Students also saw policy and government legislation as significant ingredients of the course, along with the need to put these into practice.

In terms of links between modules in the second year, the safeguarding and education modules were seen as the most linked to other modules as well as to each other. To illustrate this, each tick on Table 1 (below) represents a connection between modules as cited by one of the focus groups. Safeguarding was seen as a pivotal module to the whole course. Whilst the links between education and safeguarding, and education and participation modules were quite strong, the link between the health and participation modules was the weakest. Overlap between modules followed a similar trend and was viewed as generally helpful as a way of gaining different tutor perspectives.

Table 1: Student group views of links between modules at Level 5

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Students were given the opportunity to comment on the questions they would have liked to be addressed by the research. These covered questions about the quality and relevance for employment of the course, as well as several questions about multi-professional working, such as: *Do lecturers talk together? Are they multi-professional workers?*

Students' own views of multi-professional working appeared mostly to reflect the policy thrust of the government child protection agenda and an 'outcomes for children' rationale. Thus the reason for multi-professional working was seen as a direct response to child protection failures and strongly linked to the content of the safeguarding modules. The participation module was seen as focused on children and not on work between adults which was felt, overall, to be inadequately represented. However, some students suggested that 'working together' and, in one case, equal opportunities constituted multi-professional approaches to working. It was generally recognised that pedagogical approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, such as group work presentations and seminar activities, reflected ways of learning to work together on the course, though working with other professionals was less likely to be seen in this participatory light.

Tutor perspectives

Male and female tutors from professional backgrounds representing teaching, social work, organizational management and nursing/psychology discussed their views of multi-disciplinary courses in semi-structured individual interviews and then reflected together on their joint interpretations of a multi-disciplinary course. These are presented according to the four themes posed by the questions and extracts from the recorded interviews are shown in italics.

Professional background. Two of the tutors felt there was a strong co-relation between their teaching and professional experiences. However, the other two, who were much newer to teaching on the course, felt that there were more tenuous connections. The idea of professional background was ambiguous to one tutor, who felt that professional identity relied on keeping practising, thus making the current identity as a university tutor more relevant than an identity formed by past experiences: *It's like flying –you have to fly so many hours a year in order to maintain your licence so I think you give that up. So for me it kind of says well if we can't do it then do we need to look for commonalities.* A common feature of the course for two of the tutors from teaching backgrounds was that of linking policy to practice, though the course was not viewed by these tutors as vocational in any one clear professional direction.

Separation between modules. All the tutors talked about the tendency for modules to be viewed separately, as indicated by this comment: *At the moment everything is very separate so although we are meant to link together and see connections between things, sometimes that's a bit hard to do.* This was linked to ways of working which meant that tutors felt isolated because of the pressure of teaching so many modules. This meant that: *We don't necessarily know what other people are teaching at the same time as us so it doesn't co-ordinate and it just becomes isolated, separated aspects of childhood.* There was particular concern about the education strand of

teaching as *being all over the place* and also lack of knowledge of the state of other strands outside those being taught. This was contrasted with a much smaller Childhood Studies course in which attempts were being made to co-ordinate the themes across module strands. Despite the concern about fragmentation of the course, it was thought that tutors needed to have relevant professional background to tie in with modules and also that the course benefited from allowing students: *to examine different aspects of childhood.*

Modelling multi-professional working. One tutor felt that although there was a strong link between her knowledge, experience and current teaching, nevertheless the ECM course was seen as *very specifically discipline bound*, thereby narrowing the opportunity to learn from other disciplines which the previous course had offered: *I found it really interesting....I quite enjoyed doing the modules that were kind of a bit out of my comfort zone because I had to learn a lot and that was good for me.* In the current course, another tutor felt that: *some people seem to cling onto areas as if we can't look at it through a different lens*, whereas the same theme being taught overtly from different angles was thought to be useful to the students. Perhaps most interestingly, one tutor suggested that the links between multi-agency working and professional background need not provide barriers; for example, in a corporate setting, *the corporate aim supersedes everything else anyway so the fact that you have got this particular professional heritage is irrelevant.* Thus it was pointed out that, since early childhood settings *have different disciplines involved in providing the best for the child and the best for the families in the context of the family*, we should model this approach by having a wider range of modules in relevant subject areas beyond the faculty. In other words, it was suggested that professional barriers should be put aside.

Making a multi-disciplinary course. Although it was recognised that in practice professional identities existed on the course, most of the tutors thought that there could be a more integrated way to present the ECS course content: *I think you could do it in a very different way –different aspects of childhood rather than splitting it into health and safety and learning. You could look at a child's development over either age development or different environments that they are in.* One tutor pointed out that many themes, for example 'play', are by their nature multi-professional and should be fundamental to the course. Likewise, it was suggested that there are concerns, overriding professional issues, about students' approach to learning: *I mean they used the word to me last week, they are totally spoon fed, they feel, and when they come to university they are not- and where is the balance in terms of helping them think more broadly?* Indeed, the theme of students looking *at issues around self-awareness and communication skills for their own development* was prevalent in all the models tutors constructed.

Through the process of data analysis, two main models emerged (see Figures 1 and 2) with student personal and academic development cited as important. Figure 1 centres on children's well-being with four revolving areas of study covering policy and law, research, global issues and pedagogy, all underpinned by psychological and sociological perspectives. Figure 2 puts the child as participant at the centre and presents a course with multiple

perspectives, not yet clearly modular but distinguished by both child and adult-led concerns which link back and forth to the centre. Thus, in both models, the strands of the course, previously conceptualised as professional, have been replaced by experiential aspects of children and childhood which provide a basis for working with young children in a variety of professional roles.

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Figure 1: Multi-disciplinary ECS course 1

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Figure 2: Multi-disciplinary ECS course 2

Discussion

What are student/ staff interpretations of this example of a multi-disciplinary course?

The findings above showed that whilst ECS students were constructing a version of a multi-disciplinary course in which several disciplinary and professional objectives were seen as overlapping, there were weak links between some of the strands, most notably health and participation. Tutors were finding the course more professionally compartmentalised and failing to demonstrate, pedagogically, the theme of multi-professional/ disciplinary working. Students also showed awareness of this point, by asking questions about the extent of tutor liaison. Tutors showed some disparity in their views of whether the course met specific vocational aims and objectives but they all commented on the need for more attention to the personal and academic development of students. This was also evident in the models they created (see Figures 1 and 2). The scope of multi-disciplinary study was felt to be too narrow by one tutor who commented that course structures limited the choice and range of modules on offer to students. Overall the tutors' interpretations of the course suggest that a technical, rather than political and ethical approach to the early years workforce (Moss 2006) may be reflected in this example of a higher education course in England.

Can the ECS course be characterised as having a participatory approach to multi-professionalism?

The student view of multi-professional working was dominated by a model which accentuated outcomes for children, rather than a participatory approach to team work. In contrast, the tutors' concept of multi-professional working, as demonstrated through a pedagogical concern to model collaborative working, reflected the aims set out by Easen et al (2000). Generally, the tutors who were interviewed demonstrated the 'integrative' approach to

team work identified by Freeman et al (2000) and felt that professional isolation was counter-productive to the ideal of multi-professional practice and a multi-disciplinary course. Crucially, they wanted more opportunities to model an integrative approach to the students and they used Engestrom's (2001) idea of 'conflictual questioning' to challenge the existing practice, which left them with too little time to collaborate in planning modules.

The models (Figures 1 and 2) for a multi-disciplinary course demonstrate that tutors see the links between children's and professionals' participation outlined by Warin (2007) and would like to see children's perspectives, rather than professional boundaries, at the centre of course design.

In summary, although technical discourses, rather than participatory discourses of professionalism were reflected in some student views, tutors attempted to redress the tendency of the course design to create professional barriers. They did this by advocating political and ethical aims for the pedagogical approach to the course and challenging the dominance of different professional discourses at this level of education. In this respect, the course went some way towards a participatory approach to multi-professionalism, though this was not made overt to students.

Conclusion

'Inter-agency' work has been promoted in policy with regard to young children in England (DCSF, 2008) and this work is often given endorsement in terms of improved outcomes for children. For example, the Children's Workforce Development Council argues that: 'Integrated working is at the centre of making a real difference to the lives of children, young people and their families' (2008, 2). It is, therefore, unsurprising that students in this study cited outcomes for children as the rationale for multi-professional working.

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2009, 2) state that evidence of the effects of integrated services on children and families is 'not yet direct or definitive'. Nevertheless, Anning and NESS (2007) found that the successful (in terms of outcomes) Sure Start Local Programmes in England were characterised by multi-agency training. This suggests that, even if it is difficult to prove that multi-professional approaches to practice directly lead to better outcomes for children, training professionals together and providing multi-disciplinary courses for future early years professionals might be seen to have a positive impact on those outcomes. Likewise, although Canavan et al (2009) are cautious about attributing improved outcomes for children to integrated working, they do suggest that promoting reflective practice is the key to enabling professionals to deal with the complexity which arises from working.

Charles and Horwath (2009) make the point that current inter-agency work, revolving around approaches based on measurement and supported by the government (HM Government 2006), denies the messiness of collaborative problem-solving. In line with this view, this paper is based on the premise that understanding participatory team work is fundamental to the pedagogical approach that should inform the education of the future early years workforce. To

achieve this, it seems logical that tutors from diverse professional backgrounds should model multi-professionalism, both pedagogically and organizationally. The education of students who have not yet started professional training provides a fresh opportunity to promote an inter-disciplinary approach to work with young children, and the literature reviewed here emphasises that education for diverse roles, carried out by a diverse range of professionals, is the best approach for moving from multi- to inter or trans-disciplinary approaches to work with young children.

Looking at the gap between student and tutor views of multi-professional work in this study, it would appear that there is still work to do to make the benefit of a democratic and participatory view of diverse professional roles convincing to students.

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