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Title: Characterisation of the 'region' of early years professional knowledge

Final report: Society for Educational Studies small grant

Project Title: Characterisation of the 'region' of early years professional knowledge

Grant holder: Jim Hordern, Department of Education Studies, Bath Spa University.

Date of report: November 2015 (duration of grant September 2013 – July 2015)

Project Aims

This project aimed to identify the processes and mechanisms through which knowledge is selected, appropriated and transformed to form a body of professional knowledge for early years practice, with the use of Bernstein's notions of 'recontextualisation' and the 'region'.

The project aimed to explore (i) how knowledge from disciplines and practice is 'recontextualised' and validated within the early years knowledge 'region'; (ii) the types of knowledge that are considered valuable by 'recontextualising agents' and other key actors within the region (including practitioner bodies; curriculum developers; programme leaders; policy makers); (iii) pressures for change in the knowledge base brought about by the context of practice or driven by policy reform such as the introduction of 'Early Years Educator' and 'Early Years Teacher' roles; (iv) the 'weakness' or 'strength' of the region, and thus the capacity to develop the socio-epistemic conditions to sustain authoritative professional knowledge. This research process aimed to further develop the notion of the 'region' as a locus for the analysis of the selection, appropriation, validation and transformation of professional and vocational knowledge.

Research approach

Through focused research on relevant processes in the early years professional field this project aimed to advance understanding of the constitution of professional (or professionally-orientated) knowledge for early years practice. It sought to examine how differently situated 'knowledges' articulate and are articulated by those involved in their selection, appropriation and transformation. In so doing, the project aimed to provide the outline of a theoretical framework, building on the notions of 'recontextualisation' and the 'region', for the analysis of processes that shape the distinctive character of knowledge in curricula for professions and vocations..

In order to tackle both the 'epistemic' and 'social' dimensions of the early years 'region' this research included both (i) an analysis of curriculum documents and processes of knowledge selection and appropriation; and (ii) interviews with staff involved in qualification and curriculum development at six higher education institutions involved with the Early Childhood studies Degrees Network, and representatives of an awarding body offering a Level 3 qualification.

Timescales

This project began in September 2013 and ran until Summer 2015. Originally the project was planned to finish in September 2014. However, the investigator requested an extension to the project duration as he had not been able to complete all the data collection. This was partly for family reasons and also because of a move between institutions that took place in September 2013 shortly after the project had started.

Research activities over the course of the project

<p>Literature Review September 2013 – May 2014</p>	<p>Literature was reviewed from sociology of educational knowledge, workplace learning and learning theory, in addition to studies of early childhood professionalism in the UK and in Europe.</p>
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<p>Data collection and analysis Documentary sources January 2014 – May 2015</p>	<p>Documentary analysis started from QAA benchmark statements and details of programmes at the six HEIs (for higher education qualifications) and specifications of a range of programmes offered at Level 3. Analysis of various documents relating to the early years higher education curriculum and Level 3 awards was also undertaken beyond the original scope of the project in order to explore certain questions in more depth.</p>
<p>Data collection : Interviews June, July 2014; May-June 2015</p>	<p>Interviews were undertaken with programme leaders and lecturers at 6 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with early years/early childhood studies provision, in addition to representatives of an awarding body. A total of 12 staff were interviewed – in most cases 2 staff were interviewed together. In two instances 1 member of staff was interviewed. Some interviewees also provided documentation to illustrate the shape of their programme and content of curricula. Staff were interviewed at institutions in the South East, South West and West Midlands, in addition to London, as per the original proposal. The awarding body interview took place in London. Seven days of interviewing were undertaken at the six HEIs and the awarding body.</p>
<p>Data analysis (interviews) Summer 2014 – Summer 2015</p>	<p>This commenced in the summer of 2014 with the completion of the first interviews and transcription. Codes were developed to analyse interview data which related to the key concepts outlined in the aims and research approach above (i.e. relating to the nature of knowledge, social organisation of knowledge, recontextualisation into curricula and the broader political and policy context)</p>
<p>Advisory group meetings Autumn 2013 / Spring 2014</p>	<p>Meetings with members of the advisory group (Liz Brooker (IoE), Michael Young (IoE), Sarah Hamilton (BPP)) were held in the autumn of 2013 and in the spring of 2014. These were important for thinking through project aims, refining terms and discussing key questions.</p>
<p>Progress towards overall project objective (2014 and 2015)</p>	<p>The process of data analysis has enabled the further development and application of the analytical framework outlined in the project aims above, and this has formed the basis for further studies and conceptual development (see the box below for related outputs)</p>
<p>Seminar 2015-6 academic year (current planned date April 2016)</p>	<p>When the project started the objective was to hold a seminar at the Institute of Education, University of London where the investigator was based at that time. However the investigator moved institutions in September 2013 to Bath Spa University and therefore has organised a seminar to take place in</p>

	<p>the academic year 2015-6 following the conclusion of the project. The seminar will focus on project outcomes and will be advertised to institutions in the South West with Education Studies and Early Childhood Studies Departments.</p>
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Main findings

The project established the following principal findings, some of which are elaborated in the published and forthcoming papers listed below:

- The early years professional knowledge ‘region’ can be said to recontextualise knowledge from a range of academic disciplines (i.e. sociology, philosophy, psychology), and from the educationally-orientated sub-fields of these disciplines (i.e. sociology of education), and also from the professionally-orientated discipline or field of educational studies. However, contests over the purposes of early years professional practice can create tensions in these recontextualisation processes, resulting in certain forms of knowledge becoming marginalised in curricula. Partly this is due, in England at least, to the role of government in shaping professional status of early years practitioners and the overall context of the system of early years provision. There are also pressures, as there are in many areas of professional and vocational education to validate knowledge produced in practice contexts. This finding has been discussed in Hordern (2014) mentioned below.
- Actors within the ‘region’ have a range of views as to what forms of knowledge are particularly valuable for early years practitioners. For the majority of those working in higher education institutions there is considerable value in the use of disciplinary perspectives to illuminate the context of early years education in contemporary societies. There is also recognition of the value of studying aspects of the early years curriculum and of key topics that relate to child development. Traditions of early childhood education that have developed in the U.K. or in other countries are particularly rich sources of material for higher education. Workplace experience is considered very important, although many interviewees emphasised a critical approach to workplace practice. Interviewees acknowledged tensions between their priorities and beliefs concerning knowledge and professionalism and those of policy makers and the general public. This finding will be discussed more extensively in a future publication.
- There is little doubt that ongoing government-led reforms to the professional formation of early years practitioners is bringing some of the tensions outlined above into sharp relief. Many of those involved in higher education feel there is pressure to re-orientate their programmes towards new policy priorities and the expectations placed on new practitioners. However, this pressure is variably felt – some interviewees seemed more confident than others that they could retain the forms of knowledge in their higher education programmes that

they considered particularly important. Partly this may relate to the specific nature of their programme (i.e. a ‘purer’ academic or more overtly professional orientation), but also to the student body and the size and status of the host department within the wider university. This finding will be discussed further in a future publication.

- Overall the project has established areas of weakness and strength in the ‘region’. Weaknesses relate to the lack of coherent professional voice for early years practitioners and this strongly relate also to the fragmented nature of early years provision. This enables government to exercise considerable influence over what is defined as ‘competent’ early years work. The modelling of the current reforms in England on the standards-based model of teacher education, along with the introduction of ‘early years teacher’ roles that have been imposed rather than developed in concert with the broader community involved in early years work, may further weaken the development of a more distinctive early years professional identity. There are considerable strengths, however, in the resourcefulness and depth of commitment of those involved in leading and teaching on higher education programmes, and in the wider early years traditions upon which they draw. The international dimension to research into early years practice also seems particularly important in providing reference points and a counterbalance to current reform processes. The ‘proximity’ to disciplinary sources that some interviewees discussed, and the potential for these to illuminate aspects of early years practice and to stimulate critical engagement seem to be important advantages. In this, early years programmes may share something with other studies of education-related fields. Aspects of this finding have been discussed in Hordern (2014) and Hordern (2015a).
- The project has therefore contributed to the further development of the notion of the ‘region’ by demonstrating elements of tension between recontextualisation ‘agents’ in terms of their conceptions of valuable knowledge and practice purposes and problematics. The investigator has also pursued related work examining the circumstances of other professions – thus the work undertaken on this project has provided an important source of comparative material for ongoing research conceptualising various aspects of educational knowledge and practice. This has been discussed in greater detail in Hordern (2015a) and Hordern (2015b).

Conferences, publications and papers in preparation (please also see the box below for a list of outputs)

- A paper was presented at a TACTYC¹ conference (November 1st-2nd 2013 in Birmingham) entitled ‘Recontextualisation in the ‘region’ of early years

¹ TACTYC is the Association for the Professional Development in Early Years
<http://tactyc.org.uk/>

professional knowledge'. The session was well attended and the topics raised provoked discussion amongst delegates. A number of conference participants expressed interest in the project and this led to further avenues for exploration and contacts for interviews. The conference paper is accessible via the TACTYC website <http://tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/2013-conf-Hordern.pdf> and is also attached with this report.

- A paper entitled 'Knowledge, practice and early childhood professionalism' focusing on developing the notion of a 'knowledge-based professionalism' in the early years has been published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* (details below). The Society's support was gratefully acknowledged.
- Data collected during the project has also contributed to other papers written during the last two years (please see box below)

Research outputs which have drawn upon various elements of this project

Hordern, J. 2013. 'Recontextualisation in the 'region' of early years professional knowledge.' Paper presented at the Tactyc conference, Birmingham, November 2nd.

Hordern, J. 2014. 'Knowledge, practice and the shaping of early childhood professionalism.' *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. DOI:10.1080/1350293X.2014.975939

Hordern, J. 2015a. 'Recontextualisation and professionalising regions.' Paper presented at the 3rd International Social Realism Symposium, Jesus College, Cambridge. 30th June. This will be developed into a book chapter of contributions to the symposium.

Hordern, J. 2015b. 'Vocational knowledge: regions and recontextualisation capability.' Book chapter under review for Pilz, M. and Berger, S. *Youth in Transition: Vocational Education and Training in Times of Economic Crisis*. Dordrecht: Springer.

A further paper focusing on characterising professional knowledge with particular reference to the early years is also in progress

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