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Developing ECCE practitioners' sense of professionalism through reflective practice and on-going professional development

Dr Josephine Bleach, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Reflective practice and on-going professional development for staff are regarded as central to ensuring high standards of quality provision in early years care and education settings (Dahlberg et al 1999, UNESCO 2004, CECDE 2006). In Ireland, as in many other countries (UNICEF 2008) the education and care divide (Bennet 2003) still operates. Pay, status and conditions for staff in the pre-school sector are inferior to those in the education sector, with most Early Years Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners having qualifications well below the graduate-level training that is standard in primary schools. In addition, there are a substantial number who have no formal qualifications. This has an impact on the professional identity of those working in the ECCE sector, where often they are perceived by parents and others as 'glorified babysitters'.

This paper examines the impact of a professional development programme on practitioners' sense of themselves as early years professionals. Participants brought to the programme their professional identity, which was influenced by their 'individual dispositions and emotions, day-to-day lives and relationships, training and education' (McGillivray 2008, 246). A social, collaborative and dialogic approach (Wong 2009) enabled participants to explore their values, beliefs and practice in a safe way. Asking clarifying questions and exploring issues in-depth was encouraged. This deepened participants' understanding of both the theory and their practice.

The action reflection cycle of observe, reflect, act, evaluate and modify (McNiff and Whitehead 2006) informed the development of the programme and ensured that everyone had a 'voice' and was included. Support in developing the participants' pedagogical knowledge in the learning and teaching domains was also provided. The National College of Ireland's Code of Conduct for Researchers was observed. Good practice in relation to action research and professional development was followed.

This paper explores how through reflective practice (Schon 1983) and action research (Senge and Scharmer 2001), ECCE practitioners' perception of themselves changed from being 'just child-minders' to educators. The findings of independent evaluations (Moloney 2010; Share et al 2011) are incorporated as well as the literature on professional identity and development including Schon

(1983), Li (2002), CECDE (2006), Alvestad and Rothle (2007), Dalli (2008) and McGillivray (2008).

Through actively evaluating their own practice, not only did the participants gain new knowledge about themselves and their teaching, they also acquired the professional language required to discuss children's learning and their practice with others. Following the programme, participants could see more clearly where they fitted into the big picture, that they were at the beginning of the child's learning journey and that they provided the foundation for future learning. This enhanced their perceptions of themselves as professionals.

As the quality of the early childhood education and care depends on the motivation, skills and abilities of the staff (UNICEF 2008), providing regular and on-going professional development will encourage ECCE practitioners to contribute positively to the development of quality practice in their setting.

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