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Verity Campbell-Barr

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Thank you to my boys



Daddy, Mummy (Verity) and Reuben – drawn by Reuben, aged 9



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INTRODUCTION

My interest in professional knowledge and skills in the early years stems from two core areas. The first is in relation to debates on quality early years services and how, irrespective of the theoretical or methodological approach to explorations of quality, those who work in early years services are continually demonstrated as central to the quality of provision. Whilst I recognise that there are continued debates as to what quality is, how/if it can be assessed, its consequences for understandings of child development and its implications for early years practice (see Chapter 2), for me the centrality of the workforce for the quality of early years services raises a clear question as to what a quality workforce in the early years is. Frequently, a quality workforce is concurrent with a high level qualification (typically a university degree) and (often poorly articulated) associations with professionalism. However, the focus on qualification levels and professionalism within explorations of quality prompts a question that is my second area of interest: what should an early years qualification look like to support individuals in becoming early years professionals?

My interest in the role of a qualification to support someone in becoming a quality professional has resulted in an exploration of the knowledge and skills that are identified as being important for early years professionalism and what is my role, as a tutor involved in the delivery of degrees, in facilitating the process of an individual becoming an early years professional. As I discuss in Chapter 1, explorations of knowledge and skills and what early years qualifications might look like will be situated within a context. The context encompasses many areas, but includes considering what constitutes a profession, the role of the profession and who it is that determines this. If it is accepted that I (or any other tutor) can teach someone to be a quality professional, what should I teach, how should I teach and, importantly, what is it that I am hoping the end outcome will be at the end of teaching process? As such, the definition of a quality early years professional will ripple backwards in shaping the knowledge and skills needed to become a quality early years professional.

Determining what a quality early years professional is will be tied to constructions of the role of early years professionals that have evolved over time, encompassing subtle (and not so subtle) variations depending on the context in which the professional is working. Contextual features such as the type of service a person is working in; what is the role of the service – both in relation to policy ideals and those of the professionals working in them; the country the person is working in; the community the person is working in (e.g. urban or rural, affluent or deprived); and the children and families who are accessing the services will all shape understandings of what is a quality early years professional. Whilst it appears that my interest in exploring professional knowledge and skills in the early years has been a series of questions upon questions, I am an advocate of bringing knowledge back into the early years, seeking to explore answers to the questions rather than invoking a sense of not knowing.

Questioning is an important part of professionalism, providing the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of one's professional role, whilst also offering opportunities to develop professional practice. Often the questioning is encompassed in the long tradition of reflective practice that is present in the early years, but I am also conscious that questioning can become an almost destructive process whereby the constant questions can result in a sense of not knowing. Therefore, central to my interest in professional knowledge and skills in the early years, is a consideration of knowledge and recognising the rich and varied ways that early years professionals know how to work with young children.

An Initial Framework

My early explorations into professional knowledge and skills in the early years focused on the European Lifelong Learning statement on competences. The European Commission identifies Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (LLL) as 'a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context' (European Commission, 2007: 3). I explore lifelong learning in more depth in Chapter 2, but here I want to consider the notion of a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Again the context is framed as determining what are the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to meet the demands of working in the early years. The same contextual features that I outlined earlier will impact on the identification of the 'appropriate' knowledge, skills and attitudes and, whilst throughout the book I explore different contextual features, the trio of knowledge, skills and attitudes has provided me with an initial framework with which to begin to explore early years professionalism and what early years professional training might constitute.

In particular, the word attitudes has been something that I have explored in my own research. I am curious not only as to what is meant by an 'attitude' and its relationship to knowledge and skills, but also as to whether or not, as a tutor, I can teach someone the attitudes needed to support them in their pursuit of professionalism. The notion

of teaching attitudes quickly proffers an appreciation that teaching is not necessarily a didactic approach, whereby students are empty vessels that I (as the 'teacher') fill with the appropriate attitudes. Rather, there are implied connotations of fostering and scaffolding appropriate attitudes.

My interest in the notion of attitudes has prompted a deeper exploration of the knowledge, skills and attitudes triad for early years professionals. The focus on the early years I think is important, as I identify those who work in the early years as being distinct in their approach to working with children. My interpretation of early years has always been one that reflects the degree that I teach on, whereby there is a focus on children (and their families) from birth to the age of eight. Embedded within this is a focus on services prior to statutory school age, reflecting a belief that there is something distinct about the early years from that of schooling; albeit a distinctness that I think schooling could gain a lot from.

As I explore in Chapter 6, the term attitudes is loosely defined and has come to be used interchangeably with beliefs, dispositions and an ethic of care, but I think that each of these terms are symbolic of the uniqueness of the early years. Embedded within this loose definition is a variable array of terms, such as love, patience and empathy, that illustrate something beyond just knowledge and skills that is important for working in the early years. As I explore in Chapter 3, what is considered knowledge is often based upon epistemological hierarchies, whereby scientific reason is regarded as the basis of knowledge. Knowledge is often equated to theory and becomes centred upon that which is written about, tested and distributed in some way. However, throughout the book I refer to knowledges to reflect that I think that there are different ways in which early years professionals know how to work with children. Within my emphasis on knowledges (knowledge in the plural), I would encompass attitudes as a form of knowledge and, as I explore in Chapter 3, it is just that attitudes have different structures and processes of sharing and testing than those of theory, but are nonetheless important for early years professionals.

My focus on knowledges is about recognising the complexities of coming to know how to work with young children. As I discuss in Chapter 4, the early years draws upon a rich and varied array of disciplines that sit along the more attitudinal aspects of the profession. Choosing to be an early years professional is like choosing to study for several different degrees at once, as early years is recognised internationally as being multi-disciplinary, drawing upon psychology, sociology, biology, social policy and more. In addition there are the challenges of learning to be patient and empathetic, and then on top of that you need to know about children's interests, such as dinosaurs, deep sea creatures, wild flowers, insects, fairies, cars ... – the list could go on. Appreciating the intricacies of professional knowledge and skills in the early years is therefore about celebrating just how much early years professionals know, and being able to challenge any suggestion that working with children is 'easy'.

To add an additional layer to the complexities of working with young children, it is important to recognise that knowledge alone is not enough. For example, I can know

how to ride a bike – the theory if you like of putting one foot on each pedal and pushing down to generate momentum. However, the theory alone is not enough as I need to be able to put it into practice and if you consider your own experiences of learning to ride a bike, the theory is not very easy in practice. I remember watching my older brother ride his bike and thinking, ‘I know what I need to do’ – my grazed knees told a different story.

I am not seeking sympathy for my grazed knees, but to illustrate that knowledge has to be applied, particularly within professional contexts. The application of knowledge requires skill, but as I will discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, it is not just the skill of applying the knowledge, but in combining the different knowledges and applying them in different ways and to different extents to meet the needs of the context. Working with young children is complex, multifaceted, but also very rewarding.

The Current Climate

Throughout the book I draw upon international examples of research and practice to develop the points I am making. Whilst I would always caution against uncritically adopting the early years practice of another country and applying it in an unfamiliar context, our current early years climate is one where there is an international interest in early years services and an international sharing of ideas. The early years has a long tradition of sharing ideas internationally and there are many advantages to sharing ideas as they can offer different perspectives and new learning opportunities. However, different practices and approaches within the early years develop within their particular contexts, with their unique histories of early years services, and associated constructions of early years professionals, making the transposing of ideas and practice between cultural contexts highly questionable (Oberhuemer, 2014). Further, there are stark warnings that comparative approaches should not be preoccupied with regulative performance and adherence to a common norm of early years services, but appreciative of the differences and learning opportunities they promote (Moss et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a need to read the international examples as insights into different national approaches to early years professionalism; insights that help to illustrate a point or to promote thinking and knowledge development.

Early years is international, demonstrated by the international interest in the role of early years services in supporting social welfare strategies and providing the foundations to children’s lifelong learning (see Chapters 1 and 2). The international interest in early years services reflects my own developing interest in professional knowledge and skills in the early years, whereby there is an interest in quality early years services to support the wider social welfare objectives of supporting parental employment and lessening the educational inequalities between children from different socio-economic circumstances. The international focus on quality early years services therefore encompasses an increasing international awareness and analysis of early years professionals in pursuit of

quality services. Whilst there is much to be gained from this international scrutiny, it also brings challenges.

Throughout the book there are common stories surrounding early years professionals. There are stories of how early years services have developed and the distinction and combination of education and care within them, stories of the gendering of who is an early years professional and many stories of the challenges and struggles of being an early years professional. Despite the international focus on the importance of early years services in support of wider social welfare objectives, early years services predominantly remain underfunded, with poor pay and status for the professionals working within them.

Early years professionals are caught in a paradox of the international recognition of the important role that early years services have for children and their families, with increasing expectations as to what early years services can 'do' and 'achieve' and frequently inadequate rates of funding. I am often alarmed by the increasing expectations of early years professionals as being the answer to everything, whereby the 'answers' are often focused on narrow prescriptive outcomes that can measure and assess the effectiveness of early years services. Therefore, my focus on knowledges and skills is not only about appreciating and celebrating the complexities of coming to know how to work with children, but also about finding ways to recognise that knowledge is power. As knowledgeable professionals, knowledge becomes a powerful tool in resisting, working alongside or working with the ideals held by others as to what it is that an early years professional 'should' be and what it is that they 'should' do. The 'others' are not just policy makers who set the increasing expectations, as early years professionals have to negotiate the expectations of families, communities and, importantly, the children that they work with.

Being an early years professional is both challenging and rewarding, so my approach to the book has been one of setting the context, exploring what knowledge and skills are, bringing knowledge back in and recognising the rich and varied ways in which early years professionals know how to work with young children.

The Book

Chapter 1 begins with setting the context for an exploration of professional knowledge and skills in the early years. As such, the chapter briefly traces the historical development of early years services and analyses understandings of their role. This brief history leads into considering more recent developments around early years services and the international interest in the social welfare function of services that I have raised above. Against this historical backdrop I explore the gendered nature of early years services, touching on the construction of services as supporting mothers, whilst developing a gendered, mother ideal, of who is most appropriate to work with young children. I challenge this gendered ideal, cautioning against binary constructions of gender and

other aspects of early years services, such as care and education. The exploration of early years services provides the context against which to consider what it means to be a professional.

In Chapter 2, I pick up on the recent historical development of early years services to analyse in more detail the story of quality and high returns and its consequences for early years professionals. In particular, I consider how the emphasis on quality has resulted in a focus on the ways in which quality can be achieved. Irrespective of the theoretical or methodological approach to the question of quality, the workforce is always identified as central, and yet, in analysing workforce requirements internationally it is possible to see a myriad of approaches to how best to train those who work with young children. I explore some of the different training models that exist and how, predominantly, they look to encompass a combination of theory and practice in providing the foundations to being an early years professional.

The combination of theory and practice begins to illustrate the different ways in which individuals come to know how to work with young children, which forms the basis of Chapter 3. In that chapter I consider what knowledge is, drawing on sociological perspectives to provide a model for considering knowledges; from theoretical knowledge to everyday knowledge (Bernstein, 1999). The focus on the everyday reflects that early years is an applied profession – knowledge alone is not enough. Early years professionals need to know not only how to apply knowledge, but also how to combine different forms of knowledge and how to evaluate the knowledge. In Chapter 4 I then explore the range of knowledges and skills for working with young children, analysing the multi-disciplinary knowledge-base of early years professionalism. I explore the relationship between know-that and know-how to analyse in a more applied way how knowledges relate to skills.

Having considered the early years professional knowledge-base, Chapter 5 supports readers to analyse their own knowledge about what childhood is and how this shapes them as early years professionals. I begin the chapter with an exploration of world views of childhood: common ways in which childhood has come to be understood. I also ask readers to consider their own world view and to analyse where it has come from, both in regard to historical constructions of childhood and their own experiences of childhood. I then question the notion of a global childhood, particularly in relation to the international interest in early years services and whether this is resulting in a convergence of ideas on childhood. My conclusion is that whilst there are commonalities, it is important to recognise the multiplicities of childhoods that exist internationally, nationally and even within individual communities.

In Chapter 6, I establish that the origins of the profession are grounded in a socially expected morality. As a part of the moral expectations of professions, individuals learn appropriate emotional responses that are an expected part of the cultural context as well as expected of the profession. Using the shorthand of emotionology, I consider how emotions are focused on the other and recognise the ways in which early years professionals engross themselves in the other – the other being the child. I discuss that there

are multiple ways to refer to emotionology and even more ways in which to describe it, suggesting that the early years professional community is only at the start of articulating, distributing and validating this form of knowledge.

Chapter 7 focuses on the place of experiences for providing an empirical theory of how the world is. Through everyday observations and interactions individuals learn about the communities that they are in. Through training to work with young children, early years professionals develop an additional layer to their empirical theory as to how to interact and how to be with children. The experiences of working with children provide an important part of the early years professional knowledge-base, but experience alone is not enough to be an early years professional. Experience alone risks de-intellectualising professional practice, individualising expertise and assuming that a professional is at their pinnacle on the day that they retire. Thus, whilst reflective practice is a useful tool for learning from experiences, it needs to encompass both theory and practice. I therefore return to the work of Bernstein (1999) to consider the coming together of theory and practice, before utilising Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model as a visual representation for considering the different layers that shape professional practice.

In the Conclusion I acknowledge that the book is not an exhaustive analysis of knowledges and skills for the early years, as there are areas such as Children's Rights and Special Educational Needs that I only briefly touch upon, but are nonetheless important for early years professionalism. However, in acknowledging that the book cannot include a full and detailed analysis of *all* knowledges and skills, I conclude by focusing upon the rich and varied ways that early years professionals know how to work with young children. My hope is that in reading the book, early years professionals will recognise, appreciate and celebrate just how knowledgeable and skilled they are.

