



‘We all share a common vision and passion’: Early years professionals reflect upon their leadership of practice role

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Abstract

Early Years Professionals are graduate leaders working with children below 5 years of age, their families and practitioners in early years settings in the private, voluntary and independent sectors and children's centres in England. Their leadership of practice role is central to raising the quality of early years provision and practice. In this qualitative research study, the leadership role of the Early Years Professional is explored. The biographical and reflective methodology enabled them to reflect upon their role and deconstruct their leadership style and practices. The study found that Early Years Professionals had a defined role as *Leaders of Learning*, a specialist group within the early years workforce. Their experience of working in settings, continuing professional learning in higher education, reflective practice, emotional passion and enthusiasm for working with young children enabled them to lead change in pedagogy and shape and improve professional practice through a collaborative leadership style.

Keywords

early years professional, early years professional status, leadership, leadership of learning, reflection, reflective practice

Introduction

The early years landscape in England is continually changing and evolving through government policy. The Labour Government (1997–2010) raised the profile of the early years as an important phase in young children's learning and development as promoted in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Curriculum (Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008a). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al., 2004) highlighted the relationship between highly qualified staff and high-quality provision. The Labour Government's strategy for workforce reform, the Children's Workforce Strategy (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005), aimed to improve quality of provision through a more highly qualified

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workforce and in raising the status of those working in the early years sector. The Tickell Review of the EYFS curriculum recognizes the contribution of an experienced, well-trained workforce to the quality of provision (Tickell, 2011).

The development of a graduate-led early years workforce is central to improving the knowledge, skills and competencies of those working in the early years sector to raise the quality of children's experiences (Whalley, 2008). The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) led the development of qualifications for the early years workforce. Graduate leader training and the professional award and the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) have become important to workforce reform in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early years sector. Candidates are awarded EYPS by meeting 39 National Standards through their own practice and demonstrating the ability to lead and support others (Whalley, 2008). The standards are organized into six areas of professional practice: knowledge and understanding, effective practice, relationships with children, communicating and working in partnership with families and carers, teamwork and collaboration and professional development (CWDC, 2008). Practitioners with this status are Early Years Professionals (EYPs), graduates with a leadership of practice role (CWDC, 2006), acting as 'change agents' to improve and lead practice, support and mentor other practitioners and model skills and behaviours that support and safeguard children, particularly in relation to the EYFS curriculum for the below 5-year-olds (CWDC, 2008). In considering the education of those working in an early years workforce, similar to many European countries, the workforce has university education and holds a professional status to work with young children (Oberhuemer et al., 2010).

There is a growing number of EYPs working in a range of settings and children's centres. Throughout this article, EYPs are referred by the commonly used term 'EYP'. Their role has a generic concept of professional leadership of practice (CWDC, 2006). As EYPs work in a diverse range of contexts, their leadership role is emerging from within work-based contexts of professional practice. This 1-year research study based within one Local Authority explored the EYP leadership role, style and practices. This article describes the research methodology and discusses key findings about the leadership of practice role, identifying EYPs as *Leaders of Learning* in early years and practice.

Leadership in the early years

Leadership in the early years has been provided by nursery teachers in charge of nursery classes and units and by head teachers of nursery schools. However, there has been a general reluctance for early years leaders to recognize leadership as part of their professional role (Kagan and Bowman, 1997) valuing their teaching role more. Rodd (2006) also identifies that those who undertake an early years leadership role reluctantly identify themselves as leaders, but leadership has been invisibly taking place like,

An abominable snowman, whose footprints are everywhere but nowhere to be seen. (Bennis and Nanus, 1997: 4)

Leadership is rather like a 'knotted string, a very complex concept, yet to be fully unraveled' (Friedland, 2007: 142), but leadership in the early years has been occurring perhaps without leadership style and practices being fully understood.

Leadership has been identified as a key element of quality provision (Aubrey et al., 2006; Rodd, 2006), and the EPPE research study demonstrated, in settings where children made better all-round progress, that there was strong leadership and a good proportion of staff were graduates (Sylva et al., 2004). The EYP as a graduate leader of practice (Whalley, 2008) raises the importance of leadership within the early years sector and its contribution to children's learning and

development; ‘our youngest children deserve the best leaders to prepare them for the challenges they will face as they move forward into adulthood’ (Aubrey, 2011: xi). Evidence from the longitudinal study of graduate leadership training (EYPS) commissioned by the CWDC indicates the positive impact of graduate-led leadership in affecting change and improving early years provision (Hadfield and Waller, 2011). The current coalition government is committed to raising the qualifications and skills of the early years workforce and will further develop a highly skilled graduate-led early years workforce ‘to help give every child the chance to thrive in their earliest years’ (Teather, 2011: 12) and make sure children develop well and are ready for school (Department for Education (DfE), 2011). The continuous improvement of skills of the early education and childcare workforce was recognized in the Tickell Review (Tickell, 2011). The Nutbrown Review (2011) of early education and childcare qualifications examines the content of current qualifications, identifying how they can be strengthened and to support career progression for those working in the foundation years.

The changing educational landscape resulting from four government reviews of provision, the EYFS curriculum, early intervention, child poverty and child protection (Allen, 2011; Field, 2010; Munroe, 2010; Tickell, 2011) reflects Rodd’s (2006) view that effective leadership is required to implement government policy into practice. As early years policy develops, new leadership roles and responsibilities emerge, particularly in multi-professional working and integrated practice, for example, in children’s centres requiring distributed, transformative and shared leadership in which the leader articulates vision and distributes leadership to produce desired outcomes (Duffy and Marshall, 2007). Leadership in diverse early years contexts requires knowledgeable and confident leaders in their own area of expertise with sound leadership pedagogy who value the contribution of others. Early years leadership appears to be a result of groups of people working together, influencing and inspiring each other rather than the focus of one person carrying out tasks alone. Leadership in the early years has a collegiate leadership style developed through a relational culture (Rodd, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).

Leadership of learning

Leadership is a complex subject embracing a number of concepts (Moyle, 2006). Fink (2005) suggests that leaders should be ‘leaders of learning first and foremost, which involves understanding learning, critical thinking, contextual understanding, political acumen, emotional understanding, making connections and futures thinking’. The development of the EYP leadership of practice role is now considered with respect to young children’s learning. The qualifications and professional status required for working with young children are culturally specific to a country. In New Zealand, young children are taught by teachers, but in many European countries, children are taught by pedagogues (Oberhuemer, 2005). In England, young children in nursery education are taught by teachers in nursery schools and classes. Children who are 4 years old are currently taught by teachers in the remaining nursery schools. The European model of a ‘social pedagogue’ found in Scandinavia influenced the development of the EYP role. Social pedagogues as lead practitioners are experienced and knowledgeable of young children’s learning and development. The pedagogue supports all aspects of the child’s learning and development; they work individually with each child to establish positive dispositions for learning (Whalley, 2011). Following consultation within the early years sector, the title of ‘social pedagogue’ was rejected in favour of ‘EYP’, a new professional role of leading practice (Oberhuemer, 2005; Whalley, 2011). In the DfE’s research study about practitioners’ experiences of the EYFS curriculum, EYPs found that the EYFS curriculum and the EYPS National Standards formed a framework for their professional learning about children’s learning and development within their EYPS training programme. They were the most

advantaged group of practitioners; all had been recently trained or re-trained specifically to implement the EYFS, to lead change in settings and provide professional development for other staff (Brooker et al., 2010).

The pedagogue's role has a strategic leadership aspect, especially in managing change (Boddy et al., 2005); there is a resonance in the EYP 'being a change agent in a setting in order to raise the quality of provision and improve outcomes for children' (CWDC, 2008: 12). The relationship between leadership and learning has been a key driver of change in schools and early years settings (Bush et al., 2010). The EYP strategic and pedagogical leadership role in leading, improving and shaping practice involves leadership and learning in the broadest sense for children, parents and practitioners establishing a learning culture in which learning, knowledge and pedagogy are highly visible within an organization.

An insight into the EYP leadership of practice role is demonstrated in the Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector (ELEYS) Study (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007); this research study investigated leadership in the early years sector, identifying three fundamental requirements for leadership for learning and 10 categories of effective leadership practice:

Requirements for leadership for learning

- Contextual literacy
- A commitment to collaboration
- And to the improvement of children's learning outcomes

Effective leadership practices

- Identifying and articulating a collective vision
- Ensuring shared understandings
- Effective communication
- Encouraging reflection
- Monitoring and assessing practice
- Commitment to ongoing, professional development
- Distributed leadership
- Building a learning community and a team culture
- Encouraging and facilitating parent and community partnerships
- Leading and managing: striking a balance.

(Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007: 28)

The ELEYS Study informed the research study presented here. The above list provided a framework for the analysis identifying best leadership practices in settings where the EYPs worked. The EYPs demonstrated that they were leading learning in their settings for children, parents and carers and practitioners. Their leadership practices were in six areas of expertise: leading whole setting pedagogy, leading pedagogy and practice for outdoor learning, leading parental knowledge, leading continuous professional learning for staff, leading change and leading reflection and reflective practice. A defined leadership of learning role emerged; hence, the term *Leaders of Learning* is used in this article.

The research study context

The 1-year research study investigated the leadership style and practices of EYPs working in PVI early years settings and children's centres and in one Local Authority in England. The Local Authority is located in a predominately rural county with some areas of urban deprivation. The study addresses

research questions investigating the contribution of EYPs to quality improvement strategies within the Local Authority. Part of the research brief was to identify best leadership practice in the early years and provide a professional learning context within the research study for the participating EYPs. The term 'best practice' is used in the early years to denote effective ways found in research and professional practice in delivering services (Reardon, 2009). Six case studies of best leadership of learning practices in early years settings were identified and filmed as a DVD, part of a professional learning resource for leaders or aspiring leaders working in the early years sector (Hallet, 2013a).

The participants

The study aimed to draw a representative sample of EYPs, all EYPs working in the Local Authority were invited to take part. The participants in the sample participated by voluntary informed consent. The sample was self-selected, and its reliance upon volunteer participants was unable to ensure equality of representation of setting, centre or locality. All EYPs worked mainly within the private, voluntary and independent sector in settings providing sessional and full daycare, and in some children's centres, within the Local Authority. There were six EYPs demonstrating effective leadership of practice within their setting; they formed in-depth case studies. One of them worked in a preschool, one in a nursery classroom, two in community-based playgroups and two in day nurseries, in rural and urban contexts.

The EYPs were experienced practitioners, working in the early years sector between 5 and 25 years, and their EYPS had been achieved 3 or 4 years ago. They were mainly female with one male participant; this was representative of the predominately female early years workforce in England (Kay, 2005). The six case studies included female EYPs. The research sample consisted of more than 70 EYPs within the Local Authority.

The researchers were aware of existing familiarity and relationships between the EYPs, their settings and the central advisory team within the Local Authority. Therefore, ethical issues relating to informed consent and confidentiality in reporting (Cohen et al., 2007) were embedded within the methodology to prevent disruption of professional relationships. The EYPs participated through voluntary informed consent and were free to withdraw from the research study at anytime. A written leaflet provided information about the research study and the purpose of informing future strategy within the Local Authority. Pseudonym codes were used for confidentiality of EYPs and their settings in phases 1 and 2 of the study. The ethical procedures and research methods used were approved by the University's ethics committee.

Methodology

The research study was a qualitative case study undertaken in three phases. The first two phases collected data. During phase 1, the data analysis informed the following collection of data in the next workshop. The last phase of the study was the production of a professional learning resource in the six case study settings, demonstrating the leadership style and practices of the EYPs in the six areas of leadership expertise described earlier, forming dissemination of the research study within the professional field of practice. An overview of the research study is provided in the following.

Phase 1

- One leadership workshop
- Analysis of data and six case studies of best leadership practice identified

- Two leadership workshops
- Reflective diary
- Analysis of data

Phase 2

- One questionnaire
- Analysis of data

Phase 3

- Filming of case study leadership style and practices
- Development of the professional learning resource

A mixed-methods approach to data collection was used, the majority being qualitative with some quantitative data collected. Participants were able to respond freely by recording their understanding of the EYP as a leader of practice. The leadership workshops used narrative biographical recording and focus group discussion enabling EYPs to reflect upon their leadership style and practices. From the first workshop, six EYPs demonstrating best practice in their leadership of learning formed a group of case studies, and they further examined their leadership style and practices. In the questionnaire responded by EYPs, they expressed knowledge and understanding of leadership role.

The methodology aimed to unravel the complexity of the 'knotted string' of early years leadership, (Friedland, 2007) particularly the leadership of practice. The qualitative narrative methodology and focus group discussion used in the leadership workshops with EYPs untied the 'knotted string' in a participatory way; the researchers co-constructed meaning about 'Leadership of Learning in Early Years and Practice' with the participants, enabling the view from nowhere to become the view from somewhere (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Through co-construction, their emerging leadership style and practices were illuminated.

Reflective voices

The reflective methodology allowed participants to express views in different ways, allowing EYPs' voices to be heard; a voice like a fingerprint has a constant and unique signature that can give identification (Bolton, 2005). A biographical narrative approach (Elliott, 2006) enabled reflective space and was used in the three leadership workshops:

- Change workshop – leadership stories
- Reflective workshop 1 – story of identity
- Reflective workshop 2 – reflective leadership

As change agents, EYPs are to shape and improve practice (CWDC, 2006). The theme of 'leading change' formed the focus of the first workshop entitled 'Change workshop: leadership stories'. A total of 26 EYPs from a range of early years settings and children's centres attended the workshop to identify how they led change within their setting or centre describing and reflecting upon their leadership story and what influences had helped them lead change?

The storying methodology used in these workshops was creative, diverse and reflective, and was informed by feminist qualitative research methodology. A variety of experimental and text-orientated methods was used (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), and the methodology enabled the EYPs' experiences and collective voice to be heard and listened to (Kitzinger, 2004). The participants

were provided with writing, art and collage materials to visually represent their leadership of change, their leadership style and *leadership of learning* practices. They created pieces of visual literacy containing texts, illustrations, symbols and images (Browne, 2009) in collages and sculptured models; these communicated biographical stories of leadership experiences. These pieces formed the foundation for reflective writing and shared discussion within the group.

The use of written biographies demonstrates a source of specific information as the narrative contributes to identity formation (Silverman, 2006). Storying allows participants to demonstrate their perspective, helping individuals to reflect upon who they are, where they come from and where they wish to go. Narratives are powerful 'stories of identity' (Cuno and Gardner, 2005), and this informed the content of the workshops as EYPs developed their stories of leadership identity. Writing is the most well-known written form of reflection (Bolton, 2005); the process of writing contributed to each EYP finding voice, validating her experiences (Kitzinger, 2004), being able to express her feelings and making sense of her own leadership journey, style, practices and identity as an EYP. Participants used their visual imagery to reflect upon the process of leading learning and their leadership style in the three workshops. Participants kept a reflective diary of their *leadership of learning* practices in the intervening weeks between the two reflective workshops; at the second reflective workshop, they shared some of their diary accounts in a discussion group. The diary provided a reflective space and opportunity to take time out and think about their daily leadership practices (Garvey and Lancaster, 2010).

The 10 categories for effective leadership practice in the ELEYS Study (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007), as explained previously, was used to identify best leadership practice demonstrated in the 26 participant's leadership stories in the first workshop. In using the ELEYS framework for analysis, the content of each leadership story was ranked against the 10 categories of effective leadership for learning practices, six EYPs demonstrating best leadership for learning practices emerged and these formed case studies for further examination of their leadership style and practice. They attended two further workshops, reflective workshops 1 and 2, and during these workshops, the EYPs deconstructed their leadership for learning practices individually and collaboratively. Through focus group discussion, A model of 'Leadership of Learning in Early Years Practice' and six leadership of learning practices formed a professional learning resource (Hallet, 2013b). The EYPs reflected upon their leadership of learning practices, this is discussed later in the article.

Views of others

A structured questionnaire was used to engage the views of the wider EYP workforce within the Local Authority who were unable to attend the 'Change workshop: leadership stories'. The questionnaire for EYPs collected mainly qualitative data in nine closed style questions (statements), enabling respondents to provide relatively straightforward answers (Gray, 2006) and to generate frequencies of responses suitable for statistical treatment and analysis (Cohen et al., 2007). The Likert rating scale allowed respondents to ascertain their degree of response on a 5-point scale (Cohen et al., 2005). A 10th open-ended question enabled respondents to freely respond without using preset categories (Cohen et al., 2005).

Analysis

The study aimed to understand and identify the EYP leadership role (CWDC, 2006). Data were analysed through identifying emerging themes to gain a collective view (Yin, 2003); the case

study and mixed methodology enabled themes to be correlated from various sources (Yin, 2003). There was analysis within the qualitative research tradition of 'grounded theorizing', whereby explanation and theory are developed from the emerging analysis of data in a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 180). This method developed a collective view of EYPs with defined leadership role, as a *leader of learning* emerged. There was an understanding of the EYP role as a leader of learning and practice, now reported in five themes:

- EYPs are a specialized group
- EYPs lead others
- EYPs lead change in pedagogy and practice
- EYPs are reflective practitioners
- EYPs are a learning community

These themes are discussed and illustrated by authentic EYPs' voices and demonstrate a representation of the collective voice (Yin, 2003).

Discussion

Theme 1

EYPs are a specialized group. An EYP's voice:

We all share a common vision and passion as Early Years Professionals we are passionate and motivated for our roles. (Leadership story 6)

EYPs emerged as a specialized group of practitioners within the early years workforce. They have a common attribute of being visionary and passionate about working with children. Their vision means that they have a view for the future informed by principles and values (Jones and Pound, 2008) cognate to the early years phase of learning and development. One of the responsibilities of leaders is to develop a vision shared by staff, parents and carers; vision is often the driving force in influencing others and leading change. Practitioners do not readily articulate their pedagogical values and beliefs and require opportunities to story these through recollecting daily activities (Adams, 2005). The reflective workshops provided participants opportunity to articulate their values and beliefs developing a collective shared vision of early years principles and leadership practices.

The characteristics of strong emotion and enthusiasm are described as 'passion' and is a defining feature of EYPs in the study and motivates them to work with children, families and practitioners. Moyles (2006) highlights that successful leaders are those who have a 'deep-seated passion' for the children, school and community in which they work (p. 3). A 'natural enthusiasm for children, teaching and learning as a personal characteristic and attribute of an early years leader' is included in the Effective Leadership and Management Scheme for the Early Years (ELMS) (Moyles, 2009: 14). Osgood (2006) highlights that the emotional labour found within the early years workforce is central to their working practices, and professional identity, however, is generally devalued by society. An ethics of care that is concerned with the responsibility of caring for young children is found within early childhood education and care and is linked with emotion and emotional labour and regarded as professional traits (Taggart, 2011). The early years workforce is one of the most gendered occupational groups (Penn, 2011) in the majority of European countries, and it remains dominated by women (Oberhuemer et al.,

2010), being supported by the belief that caring comes naturally to women (Dahlberg et al., 1999; James, 2010).

It was the passion, enthusiasm and commitment for working with children that were the motivational factors for the EYPs in their leadership role, and the majority of the participants in all the case studies were women. Goleman et al. (2002) describe six leadership styles recognizing the effects upon the emotions of the recipients. Leaders who are emotionally intelligent inspire and arouse passion and enthusiasm, keeping staff motivated and committed. The EYPs in the study highlighted the importance of emotional literacy as a leadership attribute and the contribution of emotionally literate women leaders within early years settings.

The EYPS award validated their experience as practitioners, gave them specialist knowledge and raised their status and value within settings and the early years sector, giving them professional confidence and agency to lead and inspire others in pedagogy, provision and practice. The CWDC's longitudinal study of graduate-level professional development, the EYPS training, demonstrated the contribution of higher educational learning and development upon the skills, status and confidence of practitioners (Hadfield and Waller, 2011). Similarly, foundation degree graduates of an Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree awarded Senior Practitioner Status developed professional knowledge and confidence (Hallet, 2013b).

Theme 2

EYPs lead others. An EYP's voice:

I feel my role as an Early Years Professional gives me personal autonomy and authority to lead my staff; communicate with parents and engage with the children at a very professional and personal level. (EYP questionnaire response)

EYPs view their role as important to lead quality in provision and to lead staff. They recognized their role in leading learning. Their leadership characteristics included knowledge and skills, communication, interpersonal skills and initiating and managing change, and it was the EYPS that gave them recognized authority for the leadership of practice within their setting.

EYPs are expected to be 'key transformational leaders' in the implementation of the EYFS curriculum framework, which sets the standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years (DCSF, 2008b: 11). The EYPS recognizes an 'individual's expertise as a practitioner and professional leader' (Hadfield and Waller, 2011: 10). Effective leadership is concerned with creating a receptive context for improving quality of provision and fostering shared values and beliefs that underpin setting and service provision (Reardon, 2009). It is through accomplished interpersonal and communication skills that good relationships with practitioners, parents and carers develop, and these are essential for EYPs to lead practice.

Theme 3

EYPs lead change in pedagogy and practice. An EYP's voice:

Changes that will make a difference to the learning opportunities and outcomes for children. Change in my setting depended on my clear vision which I could communicate to staff through the dissemination of knowledge. (Leadership story 23)

The EYP role is to be a change agent to improve and shape practice (CWDC, 2006). EYPs demonstrated a clear understanding of leading change in pedagogy and practice. First, by identifying a need for the change to benefit children's learning and development within the setting, establishing a clear vision based upon a sound pedagogy of specialized early years knowledge, gained through higher education, EYPS training and years of experience of working in the early years sector. EYPs understood the process of implementing, maintaining and sustaining change over time, by having a clear understanding of how to lead staff, parents and children within the change process.

A central aspect of the EYP role was leadership of change in pedagogy. In one setting, the EYP and her staff attended a course about the creative pedagogy found in preschools in the northern Italian region of Reggio Emilia. She led change in pedagogical practices throughout her preschool informed by this Italian pedagogy. Another EYP was influenced by the Forest School pedagogy found in Scandinavia. She led parents and staff in developing a small woodland beside her play group into an outdoor learning environment; the children enjoyed playing, learning and exploring daily in their 'little wood'.

The 'transformational leader' who acts as a change agent will motivate others to higher goals (Bolman and Deal, 1967: 16). This model of leadership has resonance with effective leadership practices discussed in the ELEYS Project (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007), demonstrating distributed, participative, facilitative or collaborative models of leadership to be effective in changing professional practice. An effective leader ensures all colleagues are part of the change process, leading collaboratively through professional dialogue underpinned by early years knowledge and values (Colloby, 2009). The EYPs in the study were democratic leaders (Goleman et al., 2002) who used change effectively to shape, improve and transform practice (CWDC, 2008).

Theme 4

EYPs are reflective. An EYP's voice:

Through discussion with my manager and other Early Years Professionals, I am able to consider what aspects of my leadership are effective and, what needs modifying. (EYP questionnaire response)

Reflection was identified as a key feature of the EYP leadership role; they had developed reflective thinking and behaviour in their *leadership of learning* practices. Some EYPs were supported through setting- and service-based review and appraisal structures to reflect upon practice through reflective dialogue. One EYP asked her staff to reflect upon and give feedback about her leadership style and practices. In settings that had one EYP, they often reflected alone but gained peer support through attending the EYP Network Group meetings held within the Local Authority.

The concept of being a reflective practitioner is central to a professional's effective practice and a characteristic of EYPs; they are reflective practitioners with the ability to lead and support others (Colloby, 2009). Reflection enables improvement in practice, solving problems and learning from experience (Jones and Pound, 2008). The process of reflective practice is transformational and reflective democratic professionals engage in reflective dialogue with others to change and modify practice (Moss, 2008). Effective leaders are reflective practitioners who lead by example in modelling practice and behaviours and influence others. They are reflective in their own practice and encourage reflection in their staff (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). A setting with collaborative reflective processes at the centre is evolving, changing and modifying practice. Reflective practice concerns critical analysis of an individual's professional practice or the provision within an

organization (Lindon, 2010). It is a rigorous and continuous process of meaning-making, a process of constructing theories about provision and practice, testing them through dialogue and listening and then reconstructing those theories (Moss, 2008) or making new theories from their work-based reflective learning (Hallet, 2013b). The use of reflective dialogue encourages the sharing of insights and information about practice (Anning and Edwards, 2010). Reflection and reflective learning about practice informed by knowledge and experience was an important attribute in the leadership practices of the EYPs in the study.

Theme 5

EYPs are a learning community. An EYP's voice:

It has been fascinating to see all the variety of leadership and change taking place in settings with Early Years Professional Status. I did wonder when I did the Early Years Professional Status training course whether it would make a difference to settings and leadership – but today, the Change Workshop has shown me there are people out there with vision and commitment and sound philosophy. I have learnt so much from others today – it is wonderful to have that experience as often on courses I feel we don't gain anything extra. This surely means that we must take this forward, meeting, socializing and training other Early Years Professionals. (Leadership story 1)

Through EYPS training, their developing role, being involved in the research project and the EYP Network Group, an EYP learning community of peer support has been established. The EYPS training has provided a continuous professional development opportunity for practitioners to access higher education and achieve professional graduate status, and this has increased their professional knowledge and understanding of the EYFS curriculum (Brooker et al., 2010). The development of network groups in local authorities provided enhanced professional learning for EYPs. These have provided a variety of professional learning opportunities such as visiting settings and attending conferences (Colloby, 2009). These networks provide a forum for reflective dialogue, sharing research, professional practice and knowledge. These reflective conversations provide a vehicle for exchange of knowledge and collective knowledge construction and sharing. The focus on professional issues allows for roles and practices to develop (Anning and Edwards, 2010); these networks are communities of practice in which members meet and 'share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2008: 88). Regular engagement in reflective dialogue at network meetings encouraged reflective practice and development of a professional identity (Colloby, 2009). Through the research study and the EYP network group, the graduate leaders' voice and leadership agency was facilitated.

Conclusion

The research enabled EYPs to reflect and consider their role as leaders of practice particularly by engaging in the leadership workshops. By deconstructing their leadership practices in a reflective way, they illuminated their identity as EYPs, defined and conceptualized as professional *leaders of learning* working within early years settings, provision and practice. Through this leadership, the EYPs are leading change in pedagogy and practice, leading others; they are reflective, a specialist group with experience and knowledge of the early years, a learning community of practice through which they are further developing and defining their *leadership of learning* role. As graduate

leaders, they had improved the quality of pedagogy and provision in their settings, in delivering the EYFS curriculum by improving and shaping practice through change and sharing a common vision and passion for working in the early years sector.

The current Coalition Government continues to recognize the importance of a highly skilled early years workforce to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged children. The Tickell Review (2011) recognizes the value of a talented and graduate-led workforce, recognizing the impact made upon the learning and development of children in their earliest years (Teather, 2011). With this recognition, there continues to be an important leadership of practice role for graduates to lead learning to improve quality of provision and practice within early years settings.

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