Developing professionalism through reflective practice and ongoing professional development

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Developing professionalism through reflective practice and ongoing professional development

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ABSTRACT: This article contributes to the debate on early years professionalism. It explores the impact of a continuous professional development (CPD) programme, in particular a module on professional practice, on early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioners' identity as early years professionals. Action research informed the development of the programme and ensured that everyone had a 'voice'. Support in developing the participants' pedagogical knowledge in the learning and teaching domains was also provided. Analysis of the data collected revealed, how through reflective practice and action planning, ECCE practitioners' perception of themselves changed. Through actively evaluating their own practice and measuring it against the theory and official discourse of early years quality and curriculum frameworks, the participants gained new knowledge about themselves and their teaching. They also acquired the professional language required to discuss children's learning and their practice with others.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article concerne le professionnalisme dans le secteur de la petite enfance. Il explore l'impact d'un programme de développement professionnel continu (DPC), notamment un module concernant la pratique professionnelle, sur l'identité des praticiens de l'accueil et de l'éducation des jeunes enfants. La recherche-action a informé le développement du programme et s'est assuré que chacun avait une «voix». Un soutien au développement des connaissances pédagogiques des participants a également été fourni dans les domaines des apprentissages et de l'enseignement. L'analyse des données recueillies a révélé combien avait changé, grâce à la pratique réflexive et la planification de l'action, la perception qu'avaient les praticiens d'eux-mêmes. En évaluant de manière active leur propre pratique et en la mesurant au regard de la théorie et du discours officiel de qualité et des cadres curriculaires de la petite enfance, les participants ont acquis de nouvelles connaissances sur eux-mêmes et de leur enseignement. Ils ont également acquis le langage professionnel nécessaire pour discuter des apprentissages des enfants et de leur pratiques avec les autres.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Diese Studie ist ein Beitrag zur Debatte über Professionalität in der Frühpädagogik. Es erforscht die Auswirkungen eines Programms zur kontinuierlichen professionellen Entwicklung (CPD), konkret eines Moduls zur beruflichen Praxis, auf die professionelle Identität von elementarpädagogischen Fachkräften. Die Entwicklung des Programms wurde durch Aktionsforschung begleitet, um die Sichtweisen ('Stimmen'/'voice') aller Beteiligten zu berücksichtigen. Darüber hinaus wurde der Erwerb pädagogischer Kenntnisse in den relevanten Lehr- und Lernbereichen unterstützt. Die Analyse der erhobenen Daten zeigte, wie sich durch reflexive Praxis und

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handlungsorientierte Planung die Selbstwahrnehmung der Fachkräfte veränderte. Durch aktive Evaluierung ihrer eigenen Praxis und den Abgleich mit Theorie sowie offiziellen Qualitäts- und Rahmenrichtlinien erlangten die Teilnehmenden neue Erkenntnisse über sich selbst und ihre pädagogische Tätigkeit. Darüber hinaus erwarben sie die erforderliche Fachsprache, um kindliche Lernprozesse und pädagogische Praxis mit anderen diskutieren zu können.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo contribuye al debate sobre los primeros años de profesionalismo. Se explora el impacto de un desarrollo profesional continuo (DPC) del programa, en particular, un módulo sobre la práctica profesional, (en el cuidado y la identidad de los primeros años de la educación (AEPI) de los practicantes) en el cuidado y la educación de la primera infancia (CEPI) y de (como) los profesionales de los primeros años. La investigación-acción que ha informad(a)o del desarrollo del programa (y) aseguró que todo el mundo tenía una 'voz'; (A)así como el apoyo en el desarrollo de conocimientos de los participantes pedagógicos en los dominios de aprendizaje y enseñanza se imparte también. El análisis de los datos recogidos revela cómo, a través de la práctica reflexiva y la planificación de acciones, la percepción de los profesionales de la CEPI ('AEPI') cambia. De forma activa la evaluación de su propia práctica y su medición, en contra de la teoría y el discurso oficial de la calidad de los primeros años y las estructuras curriculares, los participantes adquieren nuevos conocimientos sobre sí mismos y sus enseñanzas. También adquirieron el lenguaje profesional necesario para discutir el aprendizaje y su práctica con los demás.

Introduction

Reflective practice and ongoing professional development for staff are regarded as central to ensuring high standards of quality provision in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999; UNESCO 2004; CECDE 2006a). In Ireland, as in many other countries (UNICEF 2008) the education and care divide (Bennett 2003) still operates. Pay, status and conditions for staff in the pre-school sector are inferior to those in the compulsory education sector, with most ECCE practitioners having qualifications well below the graduate-level training that is standard in primary schools. In addition, there are a substantial number of practitioners 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' (Share et al. 2011). This article examines the impact of a continuous professional development (CPD) programme, in particular a module on professional practice, on practitioners' sense of themselves as ECCE professionals.

Simpson (2010) identified two models of ECCE professionalism. One was socially constructed and determined, to a great extent, by the official discourse of professionalism contained in policy documents, while the other perceived ECCE practitioners as active and reflexive agents. He suggested the need for a greater recognition of the sociocultural circumstances in which ECCE practitioners operate and a greater understanding of the relationship between external contexts, individual resources and processes (Simpson 2010). Despite professionalism being an unclear and contested concept in the early years sector (Oberhuemuer 2000), Dalli (2008, 183) suggested that a definition of professionalism 'could be conceptually structured around the following three themes: (1) a distinct pedagogical style; (2) professional knowledge and practices;

and (3) collaborative relationships'. This article will examine the participants' perceptions of what it means to be a professional and if Dalli's definition is relevant to their experiences and context.

Developing a professional identity requires the ability to reflect on and evaluate practice, prescription and one's own thoughts (Moyles 2001) along with an active engagement and negotiation with the various ECCE discourses (Osgood 2010). For these reasons, the action reflection cycle (McNiff and Whitehead 2006) and 'dynamic conversations' (Schön 1983) should be key elements in a CPD programme. They enable participants to reflect on practice, compare practice to theory and the official discourse of professionalism (Simpson 2010) and then develop action plans to improve practice.

The overall aim of the CPD programme was to support 14 community-based ECCE centres in Ireland to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their settings through the implementation of *Síolta, The Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (*Síolta*) (CECDE 2006a) and *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (*Aistear*) (NCCA 2009). Initially, the programme focused on implementing curriculum and involving parents and families in their children's learning. However, as the programme progressed, the participants requested a module on professional practice. This article outlines the findings from the data collected during the training day on professional practice as well as the overall CPD programmes. It details the participants' perceptions of what it means to be an ECCE professional as well as their reviews and action plans for professional practice. Finally, the impact of the CPD programme on their professional identities and practice is discussed.

Methodology

> Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, ongoing professional development. (*Síolta* Standard 11: Professional Practice CECDE 2006a)

A key aim of the CPD programme was to help participants develop the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility as an ECCE professional as well as provide regular opportunities for them to reflect on and improve their practice. *Síolta* and *Aistear* were the official discourses (Simpson 2010) against which practice could be measured and discussed.

Síolta, which is the Irish word for 'seeds', consists of a series of themed questions, which enables ECCE practitioners to reflect on their existing practice and then work on areas that need improvement. Being focused on process rather than product, it emphasises the ongoing journey of working towards quality practice (CECDE 2006a). *Aistear*, which means 'Journey' in Irish, is the newly developed curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. As well as describing early years learning and development, it outlines ideas and suggestions on how these might be nurtured (NCCA 2009). Guidelines for good practice, which highlight the 'adult's important role in supporting and extending children's learning and development' (NCCA 2009) are also included. In the CPD programme, *Aistear* was a useful benchmark against which existing practice and pedagogy could be measured. Not only did it

complement the work with *Síolta*, it added another dimension to *Síolta*'s goal of improving the quality of the educational experience in the ECCE settings.

Action research was chosen as a research methodology for both developing the programme and improving the quality of practice within the ECCE settings. A powerful tool for change and improvement (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000), it is closely related to the *Síolta* Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation (CECDE 2006b), which ECCE settings are expected to implement.

> Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the settings requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis. (Síolta Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation CECDE 2006a)

Using action research would help the practitioners develop the skills needed to implement Standard 8 and learn how to improve teaching and learning in their setting through the successful management of innovation and change.

According to Senge and Scharmer (2001, 240), action research begins by creating a learning community that works together to 'nurture and sustain a knowledge-creating system', based on valuing each other equally. This includes ensuring that there is a disciplined approach to discovery and understanding, with a commitment by all participants to share what is learned. The process used in this project was conducted in termly cycles and incorporated *Síolta* Component 8.1 (CECDE 2006b) and it is outlined in Figure 1.

The first step in the process for the two facilitators involved was negotiating and agreeing the process, timetable and content of the programme with the participants. This involved a series of meetings and on-site visits with the managers and staff in each ECCE setting. Three *Síolta* Standards were covered over the course of a year in three training sessions. These sessions were supplemented by regular visits to individual settings and additional support sessions, when requested. For each Standard, the facilitators conducted a review of existing practice, using the *Síolta User Manuals*
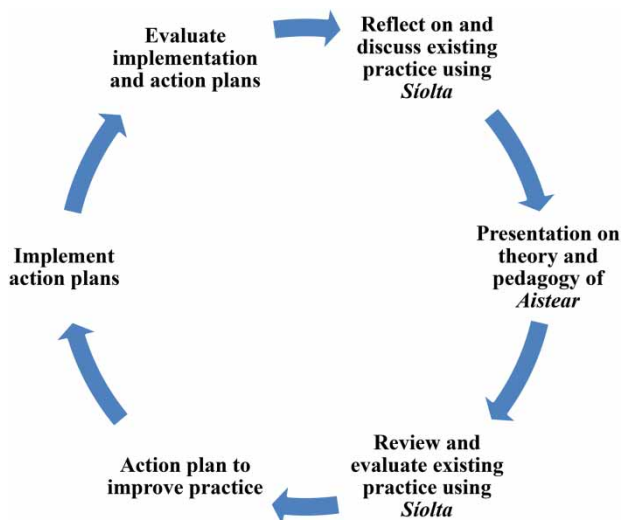

Figure 1.   Action research process.

(CECDE 2006a), with each individual setting. During these reviews, ECCE staff identified their existing good practice and as well as the changes and improvements needed if their setting was to adhere to the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks. It also gave staff an opportunity to discuss and tease out issues in relation to their own setting and request additional support, if necessary. The findings from these on-site visits were incorporated into the content of the training sessions.

As a social, collaborative and dialogic approach (Wong 2009) was a central element of the programme, a 'combined teaching structure' (Alvestad and Rothle 2007, 422), i.e. mixed, flexible, dialectal teaching, was used. The emphasis was on the positive: 'What are we doing well?' with the facilitators encouraging the participants to examine their role and practice as educators in an 'open and empowering context' (Moyles 2001, 88). This encouraged the participants to acknowledge their strengths and how they might improve their practice. It allowed everyone to 'amicably disagree' and 'comfortably inhabit a position of not knowing everything' (Frankham and Howes 2006, 626).

Each training session began with a small group discussion on key open-ended (Ellis and Kiely 2000) questions taken from the *Signposts for Reflection* (CECDE 2006a) of a particular *Síolta* Standard. Feedback and general discussion were followed by a presentation on both the theory and sample learning opportunities from *Aistear*, which related to that *Síolta* Standard. Following each presentation, the action research process was highlighted and the practitioners from each setting were given the opportunity to prioritise areas for improvements and devise action plans, which would be implemented following the training day. This format aimed to encourage collective reflection and professional dialogue, which both supported and encouraged the participants to critique their existing practice and take on the challenge of implementing new practices (Li 2008). It also enabled the participants to connect the pedagogy and theory of *Aistear* with the quality practice as envisioned by *Síolta*.

Standard 11: Professional Practice was usually the topic of the third training day attended by the practitioners in each setting. It gave them opportunity to reflect on and discuss their role as ECCE professionals and enabled them to compare their practice with that outlined in *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The training session began with questions on the difference between a professional and a non-professional worker and how they, practitioners demonstrate their professionalism to others.

The small group discussion and feedback was followed by a presentation on the skills and knowledge required by professional ECCE practitioners. This began with describing their work with children, followed by the type of practice and interactions required of skilled practitioners. It finished with the requirement for self-awareness, both in terms of an ECCE professional understanding their role and their ongoing involvement in personal and professional development.

There was then further discussion on the core principles that underpin and inform professional early years practice. Participants were asked to identify the difference between someone who practices these principles and someone who does not. Following feedback and a general group discussion, the core principles of *Síolta* and *Aistear* were presented. Links were made between the issues that arose in discussion and those highlighted in the official discourses (Simpson 2010). As with other training sessions, the presentation and discussion of theory was followed by the practitioners reviewing their existing practice using *Síolta* Standard 11 as a guide and then devising an action plan for improving professional practice in their setting.

Continuous self-evaluation is central to action research. The CPD programme was evaluated on an ongoing basis using facilitators' observations, programme documentation, feedback from stakeholders along with individual evaluation forms on training days. The notes taken on training days by the practitioners are included in the programme documentation. These included their discussions in small groups on the open-ended questions, their reviews of practice and action plans. The evaluation forms consisted of a series of closed and open statements. The statements focused on whether the participants found the training days interesting, easy to understand and useful to their future practice. The open questions asked participants to list the best things about the session as well as what aspects they would change for the future. This ongoing evaluation shaped the development and implementation of the programme.

Good practice in relation to action research was followed with ethical considerations addressed throughout the project. Confidentiality was respected at all times and the facilitators were sensitive as to how their values and actions could influence the participants. Particular attention was paid to the reliability, validity and objectivity (Robson 1993; Creswell 2003) of the feedback and triangulation was used where possible.

Findings

Analysis of evaluation forms, action plans, facilitators' observations, minutes and reports from training days and other meetings provide the findings of this article. The notes taken during discussions on the qualities of an ECCE professional will be used to illustrate the participants' perceptions of what it means to be a professional. Views on the existing professional practice in the setting along with the issues that need to be addressed to ensure that all staff in the setting are adhering to the professional standards advocated by Síolta will be examined using the written reviews of professional practice and actions plans. Finally, the evaluation forms will be used to explore the impact of the project on the participants' professional identities and practice. The themes that emerge from these findings will be developed in the rest of the article.

Qualities of an ECCE Professional

As part of training session on *Síolta* Standard 11: Professional Practice, participants were asked to discuss the qualities of a professional ECCE practitioner in small groups with practitioners from other settings. Of the 168 points highlighted as being important attributes in the records of these conversations, the dispositions and attitudes of the ECCE practitioner was mentioned most frequently (43% $N = 72$) times. Words like 'confidence', 'respect', 'open-minded', 'dedication' and 'calm' were used to describe professional ECCE practitioners. Their responsibility to be a role model for others as well as an active member of the team was also mentioned. This was reflected in the characteristics mentioned by one group:

> Confidentiality, caring (children & staff), good attitude, team worker, dedicated, interested, pride in workplace, observant, passionate, able to use initiative.

Good communication skills (30% $N = 50$) were also considered important for ECCE professionals. This included having the language and ability to interact with others,

including colleagues, parents and children. The ability to listen to and respect confidentiality was also highlighted. A professional, one group suggested, 'demonstrates by their words, actions and body language that they have an interest in the parents, families and their children'.

Another key quality was the knowledge (19% $N = 32$) of the practitioner, which was divided into two areas. One was having qualifications and attending ongoing training (7% $N = 11$), while the other was having the professional pedagogical knowledge required for the job (12% $N = 21$) Being knowledgeable meant having a broad knowledge of Early Childhood Education, being able to understand and implement the curriculum as well as being skilled at providing appropriate learning activities. The issue of professional judgement was also raised with the comments being made that 'non-professionals may not be aware of how important certain things were' and ECCE practitioners particularly needed to be 'aware of children's skills and abilities'. Professional judgement was considered a more tacit form of pedagogical knowledge, which it was suggested came from having a great deal of experience as an ECCE practitioner rather than a formal qualification.

Reviews and Action Plans

The reviews and action plans for Síolta Standard 11, conducted by each setting during the training day, reflected the findings from the practitioners' conversations on the qualities required of an ECCE professional, while focusing on practice and relationships. Of the 79 items mentioned as working well in the ECCE settings, both practice (32% $N = 25$) and relationships (30% $N = 24$) were cited most.

Participants also felt that they had the opportunity to reflect upon and review practice (20% $N = 16$) and attend training (9% $N = 7$). As one group stated in their review notes:

> We have improved on standards already in place and we reflect on our overall practice,
> Curriculum, activities and ideas at the end of the month

Of the 43 items mentioned as needing change, managing and implementing agreed changes in practice (42% $N = 18$) and improving communication structures (28% $N = 12$), both with staff and parents, were mentioned most frequently.

Finding time to reflect upon and review (23% $N = 10$) both the core principles, which inform practice, and practice itself was also a concern.

The action plans developed by the participants reflected these concerns. Analysis of the 14 action plans developed on Síolta Standard 11 revealed that 43% ($N = 6$) were around organising time to plan and reflect on implementation and practice. The following is an example of type of issues addressed through their action plans:

> Implement policies (Síolta)
> Plan a date for meetings (12.30–1.30 first Thursday) and bring to the manager
> Team to work together
> Need all staff to cooperate
> Staff time for planning and reflection

Improving communication, both with colleagues parents, was included in the majority of action plans (71% $N = 10$). It was considered central to managing the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear*, developing the professionalism of each staff member and keeping parents informed of their children's learning in the setting.

Only a minority mentioned training (7% $N = 3$) and this was in the context of ensuring that all staff were supported within the settings and had the opportunity to attend the CPD programme.

Concerns about unprofessional behaviour and its impact on implementation of action plans can be seen from these findings. In their discussions, participants divided unprofessional behaviour into two categories. The first was staff who did not have either the knowledge and/or the confidence to behave as a professional, while the second was staff who lacked interest in their work and did not engage with children or their colleagues. ECCE managers echoed these concerns, when they spoke about their struggle to keep all staff involved, motivated and engaged with the CPD programme and the action research process. However, they acknowledged that having all staff attend training days, and therefore being 'on the same page', meant that staff were more willing to participate in the process and implement agreed changes. The ongoing support that the ECCE managers received from the facilitators was also important in helping them deal with these issues and concerns.

Evaluation Forms

The themes of improving practice and acquiring professional knowledge were reflected in the analysis of all the evaluation forms given out at the end of each training day. Acknowledging the CPD programme as one where they were encouraged to incorporate *Síolta* and *Aistear* both in their own practice and that of their setting, the majority of the participants (97% $N = 482$) reported that they found the CPD programme useful to their practice. Almost half the participants (48% $N = 239$), who filled out evaluation forms, mentioned their learning as being the best thing about the programme.

> The work we covered was very interesting and useful. I learned a lot.
> It gave me another way to look at the child and a lot of new ideas for my own setting.
> Learning about curriculum and planning very interesting and informative. I don't feel so alone with it now.

While a great deal of *Síolta* and *Aistear* was already being implemented in the settings, feedback from ECCE managers and staff indicated that practitioners had, as a result of participating in the programme, acquired a professional language that enabled them to 'name and discuss what they were doing with parents and others'. Being able to engage in professional dialogue was mentioned as a positive outcome of the programme by a third of the participants (33% $N = 161$) who filled out evaluation forms. As reflected in the following quotes, participants felt that the programme gave them an opportunity to share ideas, practice and action plans with other ECCE staff:

> The atmosphere was very easy going and it helped to promote a good sharing session amongst all the groups involved. I felt that we are starting to work well together as a team as well as individual groups.
> Being moved around the room and mixing with other teams helped us to network and see how the training was working in other organisations.

For some participants, taking part in discussions with other ECCE practitioners was very difficult initially. Many were unfamiliar with the language and concepts being used and felt that they had not the 'words' or language to express their opinions. Some found it a challenge to make explicit practices that were until now implicit.

Others needed to develop the confidence to speak about their practice in front of practitioners from other settings. For one participant, the best part about the programme was:

> Learning from other crèches and overcoming my fears and speaking out in front of everyone with my thoughts and making an input to the discussion.

For others, the training sessions provided valuable opportunities to reflect on and discuss their practice with colleagues from their own settings. Using *Síolta* and *Aistear* as the basis for the discussion and the standard against which practice could be measured ensured objectivity and allowed participants to be open with one another and express their opinions freely.

Overall feedback from both ECCE managers and staff indicated that participating in the CPD programme had increased the confidence of participants and had given them a greater sense of themselves as professionals. Over the course of the programme, perceptions changed gradually from, 'We are only care workers with responsibility for minding children' to 'We are professionals with responsibility for supporting children's learning and development'.

Discussion

To develop ECCE professionals, Moyles (2001, 89) suggested, 'professional understanding itself needs to be nurtured, to be allowed time to develop and opportunity to be applied.' The process used in the CPD programme was critical in developing the participants' sense of professionalism. From the beginning, it enabled them to improve their 'knowledge through action and their action through reflection' (Ellis and Kiely 2000, 3). Using open-ended questions (Ellis and Kiely 2000) based on *Síolta's Signposts for Reflection* (CECDE 2006a) as a basis for discussion gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on and review their practice in a professional setting. This enabled the participants to make their existing knowledge and practice explicit. The presentations on *Aistear* furthered their knowledge of Early Childhood Education, while engaging in action planning with others from their setting allowed individual practitioners to contribute positively to the development of quality practice in their setting. Through these sustained interactions, as in Li's (2008) study, information became knowledge and knowledge became shared wisdom.

Using a social, collaborative and dialogic approach, as Wong (2009) suggested, was important in developing the participants' sense of themselves as both professionals and educators. Incorporating small group work, both before, during and after the presentation of theory, was central to the process of dialogue and self-reflection as envisioned in the Síolta Manuals (CECDE 2006a). It provided a safe, yet challenging, space for participants to discuss and analyse both theory and lived experiences (Herr and Anderson 2005). As with the practitioners in Li's study (2008), it allowed them to reflect on the effectiveness of their own professional actions and judgements and consider the impact these had on the children, colleagues and parents with whom they worked. By encouraging participants to actively examine their own perspectives and actions, these dynamic conversations (Schön 1983) helped to challenge the existing knowledge, skills and values of the participants along with the norms and practices in their settings.

Engaging in professional development was not easy for some participants and it involved a careful negotiation and establishment of authentic, trusted relationships,

as Herr and Anderson (2005) suggested, on the part of the facilitators. Most of the participants had low levels of education and lacked confidence, not only in their own practice, but also in their basic communication and literacy skills (Share, Kerrins, and Greene 2011). However, as Moloney (2010, 28) also found in her evaluation of the programme in Limerick, that once staff attended training 'they were just buzzing and full of ideas and there really were no more problems after that first day of training'. By the last day of training, childcare staff, who were initially 'nervous of speaking, participated well'.

As in Alvestad and Rothle's (2007) study in Norway, sharing their experiences as equals helped to motivate and encourage the participants to get involved with the programme, improve their own practice and implement the agree actions plans. Working through interpersonal and professional tensions towards the achievement of goals, as Frankham and Howes (2006) suggested, created a sense of common 'moral purpose' (Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher 2005, 54), which strengthened not only the participants' confidence but also their sense of self. Engaging all the participants in meaningful dialogue where everyone's voice was clearly heard, as Deakins (2007) advised, improved their self-esteem and their confidence in their organisation and profession. By creating an enthusiasm to work with complexity, to manage the competing demands of theory and practice and to review values and value-related decisions (Frankham and Howes 2006), the programme enhanced the participants' professional capabilities, both individually and collectively (Senge and Scharmer 2001).

Being an ECCE professional requires knowledge of children and pedagogy. However, the broad diversity in the qualifications of the participants, with some not having any formal qualifications, meant that a considerable number of participants in this programme had, as is common in Ireland (National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee 2002), gained their knowledge and skills through experience rather than formal training processes. This, combined with the lack of national early years curriculum guidelines prior to *Aistear*, limited their knowledge and understanding of early childhood pedagogy (Li 2008). *Aistear*, as it offered 'access to new ideas and new knowledge' (Alvestad and Rothle 2007, 415), was used to support the development of the participants' pedagogical knowledge in the learning and teaching domains. It was the theory against which practice could be measured and provided educational meanings for familiar practices. As some of the participants explained to Moloney (2010) in her evaluation of the programme in Limerick, finding out about the theory and how it is linked to practice was an essential element of the programme. It motivated them to move from providing what was often a mixed, unrelated, range of educational activities to assessing and planning activities based on the children's learning needs and interests.

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). Professionalism is considered to be a contested concept, which is dependent upon the particular cultural discourse used to define and evaluate it (Oberhuemeur 2000). Interestingly, given the difference in both the cultural context and qualifications of the participants, the three themes, which emerged from Dalli's study (2008) in New Zealand: (1) a distinct pedagogical style; and (2) professional knowledge and practices; and (iii) collaborative relationships', were reflected in the findings of this study. The pedagogical style, i.e. a specific strategy, disposition or attitude to early childhood teaching was mentioned most frequently in the discussions on the qualities of a professional ECCE practitioner.

Encompassing Shulman and Shulman (2004, 259) 'willing and motivation' construct of accomplished teachers, it was considered an essential requirement of a responsible committed professional, who enjoyed their job. Participants were also very aware, as Siraj-Blatchford (1993) found, that effective teaching must be based on the practitioners' knowledge and experience of children and the way in which children learn. They felt a professional needed the qualifications, skills and experience to understand and implement the curriculum and support children's learning. Finally, participants clearly identified warm, respectful and positive relationships in terms of colleagues, children and parents (Day et al. 2006) as being an important attribute of a professional ECCE practitioner. Through their engagement in the CPD programme, participants conceptualised and articulated their own definition of professionalism and used it as benchmark against which their own behaviour and that of their colleagues could be measured. Their sense of identity as professionals increased and they acquired not only the knowledge and language, but also the confidence, to interact with others in a professional way.

Conclusion

This article explored how a CPD programme, using reflective practice (Schön 1983) and action research (Senge and Scharmer 2001), impacted on ECCE practitioners' perception of themselves as professionals. Through actively reflecting on and evaluating their own role as an ECCE practitioner, 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. The use of action research in this study, as Kemmis (2009) suggested, helped to change practitioners' practices, their understanding of their practices, and their way of relating to others in their settings. This helped to reshape their identities as professionals.

The action research process was instrumental in helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Ellis and Kiely 2000). It allowed the participants to discuss and conceptualise the professional roles and norms of an ECCE practitioner. This included appreciating and understanding both the formal and informal expectations of conduct expected of an ECCE professional (Garman et al. 2006) as well as the official discourses (Simpson 2010) of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Like Dalli's (2008) study, pedagogical style, professional knowledge and practice and collaborative relationships emerged as the most important attributes for an ECCE professional with the values of responsibility and communication considered of central importance (Osgood 2010).

The quality of the early childhood education and care depends on the motivation, skills and abilities of the staff (UNICEF 2008). Educational improvement, according to Moyles (2001, 89), 'depends on practitioner feeling they WANT to make a difference; upon them feeling empowered and professional'. The CPD programme enhanced participants' awareness and capabilities, both individually and collectively (Senge and Scharmer 2001). Beginning by recognising their current levels of mastery, participants were able to work collaboratively to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their centres.

With the notion of professionalism in the early years becoming a central concern to a range of policymakers, ECCE practitioners and stakeholders, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on early years professionalism, particularly how it might be reconceptualised in a way that reflects the reality of ECCE practitioners' experiences

(Dalli 2008). It also demonstrates that regular and ongoing CPD programmes, particularly those which provide scope for reflexivity, support ECCE practitioners to develop as professionals and contribute positively to the development of quality practice in their setting.

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