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Experiences of career trajectories and professional transitions by early childhood professionals: Early thoughts on a doctoral research study

Clarrie Smith

Cl.Smith@leedstrinity.ac.uk

The purpose of this doctoral research study is to examine the complex array of factors that shape the lives and careers of professionals working in early childhood education and care in England. Taking a narrative approach (Reissman 1993) the stories of six early childhood professionals are brought to the forefront to examine what factors influence the participant's lives, career trajectories and professional transitions. This research does not attempt to make generalizable conclusions, it attempts to examine the way these professionals seek to make sense of their experiences and the impact of their lives on their practice. This is an area of research that Bullough (2016) and Urban (2008) claim is a rich and under-researched dimension within discussions about early childhood professionalism in the 21st Century.

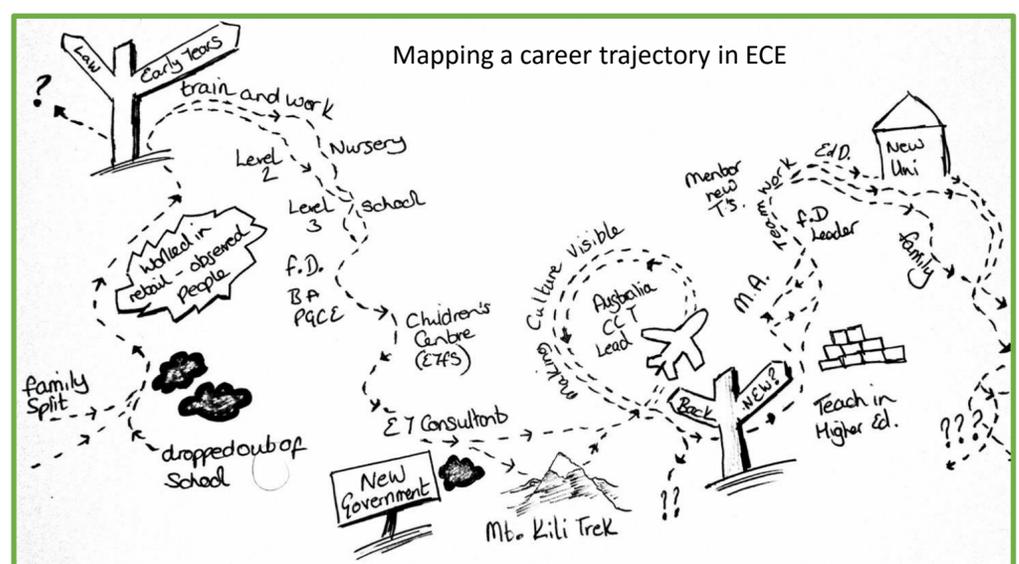
Literature Review

When critiquing the challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession Urban (2008 p.7) noted a "clear distinction between those who talk and those who are talked about." More recently Bullough (2016) reinforced this claim, stating that in contrast to other educational areas, little is known about the lives and careers of early childhood professionals and how people's lives influence their practice. The literature review builds upon these studies, examining a wide array of factors that can influence the lives and career trajectories of early childhood professionals (Skattebol, Adamson, and Woodrow 2016; Smith 2012).

For this study the term professional transitions is interpreted as a change, a shift, or a turning point that the participants identify as valuable when reflecting on the pathways, or trajectory, of their lives and careers as an early childhood professional (an example shown on the right). The participants can expand on the connections and interwoven nature of professional transitions, maybe reflecting on possible ways they have subverted tensions in the profession through reactive or strategic choices. The participants are not chosen to be representative of the workforce, but the range of challenges, triumphs, rhythms and rollercoasters portrayed in this study captures the complexities of career trajectories when working within early childhood education and care.

Method and Methodology

I interpret narratives as stories created by people to link elements of their past, present and future, providing insights into their worlds and meaning-making processes. I am still piecing together what Clough (2002) calls the moral and ethical positioning which informs my interpretation of narrative. Yet Stronach's (2010, p.72) view appeals to me where narrative "empowers contradiction and lets history, ethics and desire back in." A narrative approach acknowledges the complex and multifaceted nature of knowledge, and is not suited for large numbers of participants (Reissman 1993). This research uses purposive sampling to select six participants working across the diverse remit of early childhood education and care. The participants are asked to map or draw (example below) the trajectory of their life and career (similar to Nilsen 1994), highlighting key transitions and influences, before helping inform a discussion. Whilst the approach to narrative analysis privileges the tellers experience, "interpretation cannot be avoided" (Reissman, 1993, p.61) and analysis in this study considers the structure and organisation of the narrative, as well as content.



Questions to consider:

- What are key professional transitions in your career and life?
- How has your own personal professional trajectory unfolded through different roles, changes in workplaces or ways of contributing to early childhood practice?
- How does knowledge of the early childhood context and socio-political structures influence professional development?

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