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Towards mentoring as feminist praxis in Early Childhood Education and Care in England.

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Towards mentoring as feminist praxis in Early Childhood Education and Care in England.

Abstract: Following our contribution to a study of mentoring in seven European countries, we explored epistemological and ontological inconsistencies within mainstream mentoring systems and their regulated practice in England. We considered how feminist mentoring praxis can unsettle conceptualisations of mentoring relationships and challenge inequity in the early education systems and the practice of teaching young children. Predominantly female, early childhood educators suffer from low status in England and their working lives may be controlled and policed through inequitable systems. On entering the workforce, trainees encounter a reductionist policy milieu where mentoring structures and normative assessment arrangements contribute to inequity. Mentors play pivotal roles in inducting trainees into their worlds of work with young children. Mentoring relationships can determine whether trainees accept the status quo. Principles derived from feminist praxis enable mentors to practise an ‘engaged pedagogy’, co-constructing knowledge, subverting hierarchies and contesting taken-for-granted aspects of policy and practice.

Keywords: early childhood, mentoring, feminism, policy, praxis, England

Introduction

In 2014, we participated in a study of mentoring arrangements for trainee early childhood educators in seven European countries. Through a review of literature, national documentation and interviews with a small sample of mentors in England, we contributed to a collective and comparative report (Oberhuemer, 2014). In our enquiries

for that study, we focused on the processes and practices of mentoring in graduate-level training for educational work with children aged from birth to seven years. We reported the arrangements in England for formal mentoring within three major routes to a relevant qualification in England:

1. Early Years (3-7) Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)
2. Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (birth-5)
3. Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) (birth-5).

These qualifications collectively prepare trainees for working with children from birth to seven, although none independently covers the entire age-range. Prior to September 2014, qualified teacher status (QTS) was required for teaching children in state sector schools and nurseries. But since this date, all three qualifications became relevant for teaching four- and five-year-olds in the ‘maintained’ sector, as well as for work in private, voluntary and independent settings in the ‘PVI’ sector. In all three cases, qualification depends on meeting nationally prescribed Standards (DfE 2011; NCTL 2013), evidence for which is partly gathered from performance in work-based placements. Workplace mentors are assigned to support and assess trainees..

In this article, we argue that epistemological and ontological inconsistencies exist within mentoring systems and their regulated practice in England. Predominantly female, early childhood educators suffer from low status in England (Nutbrown 2012) and their working lives may be controlled and policed through inequitable systems (Tronto 1993). On entering the workforce, trainees encounter a reductionist policy milieu (Kincheloe 2012) where mentoring structures and normative assessment arrangements contribute to inequity. We offer an analysis of a mentoring relationship to suggest how mentors play pivotal roles in inducting trainees into their worlds of work with young children. We argue that mentoring relationships can determine whether

mentors and trainees accept the status quo or are enabled through an ‘engaged pedagogy’ (hooks 1994) to unsettle mainstream conceptualisations of mentoring relationships and challenge inequity in the early education systems and the practice of teaching young children. Our analysis draws on the principles of feminist praxis and highlights three particular areas of tension: assessment and performativity; status and hierarchies; and educating and caring for young children within an accountability culture where knowledge has become commodified.

Mentoring arrangements in the context of professionalisation

Provision in early childhood settings in the maintained and PVI sectors in England has emerged from different traditions (Giardiello 2013), which have influenced the qualifications required for work within them. For example, in 2013 ‘the proportion of staff with Qualified Teacher Status was much lower in group-based and out of school settings (ranging from five to 11 per cent) than in school based settings (42 per cent in primary schools with reception but no nursery classes)’ (Brind et al 2014: 141). The concept of a graduate-led workforce across these sectors is a comparatively recent phenomenon. During the first decade of the 21st century, political interest in the Early Years intensified (Eisenstadt 2012) and significant government investment was directed towards ‘professionalisation and upskilling of the early years workforce’ (HM Government 2007: 36). The PVI sector was a target for this professionalisation agenda as former childcare services metamorphosed into ‘Early Years’ providers, required to register with the education inspectorate, Ofsted.

Simultaneously, providers of programmes for graduate level awards such as EYPS were required to create appropriate mentoring arrangements for trainees. These were modelled on arrangements for QTS programmes, although little guidance was

provided by the Department for Education (DFE) or its associated bodies. Published requirements concerning mentor characteristics are minimal and appear to be a low priority. For example, in 2012 the former Teaching Agency advised in a footnote that, ‘A work-based mentor should be someone that is able to visit the candidate within their setting or placement and provide advice and support on elements of the candidate’s practice. They should have significant experience of working in Early Years settings and have up to date knowledge and practice.’ (TA 2012: 42) Andrews (2010) has observed that information for mentors tends to be information-based, rather than education-based and lacks attention to the pedagogical basis for mentoring. Consequently, we were prompted to ask ‘what makes a good mentor’ in the context of a growing PVI sector, against a backdrop of policy emphasis on professionalisation as reflected in the national Standards for teaching young children. Following submission of our contribution to the European report, we revisited the subject of mentoring with a particular interest in the wider political context and its influence on contemporary arrangements.

Feminist values and early childhood education and care

Adopting a feminist lens, we were interested in hooks’ (1994: 18) assertion that, ‘one could teach without reinforcing existing systems of domination’ by embodying feminist principles for an ‘engaged pedagogy’, which still resonated some twenty years after its publication. Her pedagogy incorporates refusal to accept a public/private dualism or mind/body split in learners’ experiences; values learners’ voices; is holistic; encourages risk-taking by students and teachers; and views education critically as well as for its liberating potential. Although hooks specifically sought to draw attention to the marginalisation of black American women by universalist feminist theorising (usually

by white, middle class, privileged others) she attempted to draw attention towards the central tenet of feminism: the wider aspiration to redress inequities caused by or through inattention to socially constructed systems and structures that perpetuate discriminatory otherness. In her work, hooks contends that many educational pedagogies reflect and perpetuate hierarchical social arrangements (Florence 1998). To combat these imbalances in power dynamics requires the rejection of the prevailing structures themselves (Tronto, 1993) since attempts to improve one's place in existing hierarchies may negatively displace others in the process. In the Early Years, these hierarchical structures may be constructed between educators and children, educators and their colleagues, trainees and their mentors and educational 'phases', such as 'pre-school' / Early Years and primary or elementary schooling.

Influenced by Freire, hooks argued that educators should, 'teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls' of students (1994: 13), but acknowledged the difficulties of nurturing caring relationships with students with the intention of making it possible for students to become themselves (Freire 1972). hooks called for an engaged pedagogy, encouraging mentors to embed care – even love – for students as the norm (overcoming the mind/body dualism) while recognising that, 'Teachers who love students and are loved by them are still "suspect" in the Academy.' (hooks 1994:198) It is outside the scope of this article to discuss complexities surrounding pedagogies of love but is noteworthy that similar anxieties have troubled the early childhood field (see for example Hughes 2010). hooks argues that, 'some of the suspicion is that the presence of feelings, of passions, may not allow for the objective consideration of each student's merit.' (hooks 1994: 198). This poses a challenge for mentors who are simultaneously positioned as supporters and assessors of their mentees' development. Tronto (2013: xiv) also suggests that 'care relations are often relations of inequality,

posing an immediate challenge to any commitment to democratic equality'. In other words, adopting a feminist approach to [mentoring] relationships is inherently challenging in addition to external challenges that a feminist orientation may seek to overcome. MacNaughton (1997) concludes that,

The challenge in reconstructing the pedagogic gaze with feminist intent in early childhood is twofold: to find ways of increasingly articulating, circulating and centring feminist reconstructions within early childhood education; and to continue to critique the pedagogical and political implications of our own reconstructions as feminists. (ibid: 322)

In light of hooks' call for emotional investment in mentoring, the qualities that Osgood (2006:126) observed in early childhood professionals seem apposite, namely: 'affectivity, altruism, self-sacrifice and conscientiousness'. These qualities are not substantiated by an ethic of care based on a feminised conceptualisation of the workforce (albeit predominantly female). Rather, they belong to a feminist view that caring is the moral dimension underpinning educational relationships. Osgood later suggested that caring qualities may be devalued in a culture where the practice of performativity includes the 'embodiment of externally defined notions' of (masculinist) professional behaviours that demonstrate 'accountability, transparency and measurability' within the boundaries of a regulatory regime (Osgood 2010: 122-3). But caring relationships in mentoring become possible where definitions of teaching are reconfigured such that teachers (mentors or trainees) are, 'committed to teaching and to building professional relationships with learners...as a very important aspect of teaching, without necessarily perpetuating the patriarchal discourse that links caring to femininity.' (Perold, Oswald and Swart, 2012: 119).

Mentoring offers space to reconsider and respond to dominant and marginalised constructions of teachers and mentors through a respectful but challenging dialogic process that extends reflection into transformative action.

From reflective practice to feminist praxis

Reflective practice has been described as an essential aspect of practitioners' work (OCR, 2012) and is integral to the mentoring relationship, particularly where the participants are involved in a 'reflective' or 'development' model of mentoring (Lord et al, 2008). Within these arrangements (which differ from behavioural approaches aimed at fostering practical skills), the mentor's role involves 'employing their own detailed and contextual knowledge as a basis for "coaching" students ' in the reflective process' (Furlong and Maynard 1995: 58).

In feminist praxis, a mentor collaborates dialogically with a student to enable both to 'reflect on their own 'situationality' to the extent that it challenges them to act upon it' (Freire, 1978: 80). Providing a participatory, dialogic space may enable students to distance themselves from everyday experience and construct a reflexive narrative (Picchio et al, 2012) that encompasses critical appraisal of their own beliefs, political ideology and the influence of both on Early Years communities.

Challenges for mentoring relationships

Developing an engaged pedagogy is a challenge within the context of neoliberal and neoconservative educational agendas, which are typified by the call to policymakers to, 'consider what can be done to develop their stock of human capital...compete on the basis of their talent' and 'invest in all their people as early in life as possible' (EIU, 2012: 31).

The challenge of assessment

The discourse of performativity is prevalent in the English educational system (Jeffrey et al, 2008). Whilst children's performance in the early years is measured against a range of Early Learning Goals (ELGs), the performances of PVI and state settings and teachers are measured by frequently changing, ever more 'rigorous' Ofsted criteria as well as internal systems of observation and performance tracking. Additionally, student teachers' performance is assessed against national Standards relevant to their intended qualification.

Yet whether the final outcome is actually termed a goal, a target or a standard they are all essentially forms of uniformity and standardisation and are structures of managerialism. Many of these outcome measures have gained legitimacy and power through being relocated from their politically ideological positions to legislative requirements. When expectations are enforced through statute, teaching practices can be audited for consistency, effectiveness and curriculum fidelity. Likewise, data on children's progress can be monitored to ensure every child's right to succeed.

However, there may be other subtler, less benign uses for prescribed Standards. For example, Meiners and Vinn cite Foucault's concept of 'panopticism' (perceived as an all-pervasive watchfulness) as a 'way institutions create disciplinary policies that act as a gaze from the powerful in the daily lives of people' (2014: 100). From this perspective, Standards ensure that those employed by the state or whose work is reliant on state sanctions (such as in the PVI sector) conform to requirements even when not under the immediate or obvious scrutiny of those in charge. Through the mechanisms of 'standards' in teaching and 'goals' for learning, the direction of that teaching and learning become predetermined. This assumes that student teachers will subscribe to the notions of education advocated by those in power, accepting the technicist role (Ball,

2003) that has been embedded in much policy since the introduction of a National Curriculum more than thirty years ago.

In their study of ‘accompaniment’ in training for ECEC professionals in Belgium, Pirard and Barbier (2012) outline three co-existing cultures of teaching, training and professionalization and argue that the latter is action based, reflective and enables the emergence of competencies through a localised, democratic process rather than a hierarchical model of knowledge transmission characterised by the first two cultures.

But for many students and their mentors the demands of competencies for teaching in the English context may be hugely problematic, particularly for those who have chosen teaching for its perceived professional autonomy (Webb et al, 2007) and their commitment to relational pedagogies. While many examples of democratic leadership and collaborative learning exist across the sector, the ‘professionalization agenda’ has been articulated, imposed and regulated from without, rather than emerging from a democratic movement within the field. Although the Standards advocate planning “teaching to build on prior learning” many teachers express concern about the pressures of a goal-driven environment (Jeffrey et al, 2008). Similarly, the ELGs themselves are based on normalisation of development (Linklater, 2006; House et al, 2012) that can present particular dilemmas for teachers mentoring students in Early Years.

The challenge of status

Equality and status represent potent challenges for individuals and the sector as a whole. In respect of mentoring, these challenges occur at societal level, relating to inequalities among social groups; at sector level, where Early Years continues to occupy a low

status in the educational ranks; in organisational terms, where professionalisation agendas promote hierarchical structures; and for individuals, where mentors are constructed as 'knowers' and mentees as 'unknowing'.

This may represent a greater challenge for early childhood workers than for their colleagues who work in later phases of education. Historically, Early Years has lacked political interest and investment and although there has been an increase on both counts internationally in recent years, the status of those employed as early childhood educators and carers remains low (Nutbrown 2012). This may relate in part to the lack of value attributed to caring as an occupation. Tronto (1993) has argued that society's hostility towards care arises from a view that dependency on others is a weakness. But she also argues that due consideration of care gives rise to questions about social justice in people's everyday lives. Such questions lie at the heart of feminist praxis and, rather than residing in or perpetuating (masculinist) views of caring as instinctive to women because of their sex, they should become central to wider moral debates about politics and society (ibid).

These issues require thought and action that reaches beyond the boundaries of the nursery walls and its internal community. However, the mentoring relationship may be pivotal to refocusing lenses through which students are encouraged or discouraged to engage in dialogue and debate. The relative status of 'mentor' and 'mentee' is a moot point.

Leadership models may also impact the nature of mentoring relationships in workplace settings. In their study of the impact of EYPs, Hadfield and colleagues noted that these new 'leaders' employed a range of strategies to begin to effect change within their settings. Those that were most successful were working in settings where models of practice leadership were already widely embedded (Hadfield et al 2012) and

seemingly distributed throughout the team. Others encountered resistance to change, perhaps resulting from the association of knowledge and leadership with a particular, externally defined status.

Clutterbuck (2014:xii) claims that ‘much has changed’ in the thirty years since mentoring programmes first appeared and were typified by ‘transactional, mentor-protégé relationships’. However, the emphasis on recruiting ‘experienced’ educators for mentoring roles may often translate in practice into seniority of position. The introduction of leaders whose roles have been defined by external agendas and prescriptive Standards (such as EYPs) complicates the structures in which mentoring takes place in ECEC settings. Research on the development of an EYP mentoring scheme revealed that, ‘EYPS mentors were both mentors **and** employers or supervisors in early childhood settings and were holding constructs of themselves as employer or supervisor alongside mentor constructs’ (Andrews, 2010: 4).

There is little empirical research or statutory guidance on the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to become a mentor in the Early Years or indeed about status. None is provided in any documentation concerning institutional mentoring arrangements, although mentors for a teacher’s induction year, ‘must hold QTS and have the necessary skills and knowledge to work successfully in this role...It may, in some circumstances, be appropriate for the headteacher to be the induction tutor’ (Department for Education, 2013: 17); and Parliament’s Education Select Committee has recommended that mentors have at least 3 years’ teaching experience before taking on the role (Education Select Committee 2012).

The challenge of commodification

Colley (2000:2) suggests that the often acritical and multiple meanings attributed to mentoring are continually adapting ‘to the way in which political and social contexts determine meaning differentially’. Characterising society as one dominated by an exchange paradigm, in which power dynamics and the emotional investment by mentors are ignored, she suggests that, ‘the appearance of mentoring - in the form of its official discursive representations - is shaping and strengthening its structural essence, in ways that work against both mentors and mentees in current implementations of policies for education’ (ibid: 13). Mentoring becomes a pragmatic activity, typified by the commodification of knowledge that is measured against prescribed standards and mentors’ performance in helping trainees to achieve these.

The prevalence of an accountability culture and the language of commerce, is revealed by Clutterbuck (2014: xiii) who reports that the drivers for modernisation of mentoring include:

- The desire to make mentoring available to much wider audiences, at lower cost...an instrument for broad social change...
- The need to link...more closely with...talent management, performance management...
- The need to demonstrate value for money, which is in turn leading to more effective measurement processes.

In our analysis of documentation published by organisations endowed with authority to oversee and regulate teacher education (e.g. National College for Teaching and Leadership, NCTL 2013a), the present ‘Modern’ appearance of mentoring for trainees is represented discursively as a largely beneficent and entirely necessary element of becoming qualified to teach young children. However, the introduction of monetary incentives through Performance Related Pay for teachers, which may be linked to fulfilling a mentoring role, radically alters what Colley (2000) describes as the

'structural essence' of mentoring. This ideology may exacerbate the hierarchical appearance of mentors as experts by emphasising the importance of status, calling into question the extent to which mentoring can develop through interdependent responsiveness in collaborative learning interactions between mentor and trainee. It stands in stark contrast to philosophies in which knowledge is constructed as localised, non-hierarchical (Noddings 2005) and, therefore, resistant to commodification and judgment against Standards.

Mentor as co-learner

Mentors and mentees will often recognise that their own learning has developed as a direct result of articulating their pedagogical practice with others and engaging in reflective processes together (Hallett 2012). Although this demonstrates that by developing cooperative interactions and respectful associations, both mentor and mentee can exist as productive learners within a reciprocal relationship, a culture of collaboration that is valued by both parties, this aspect of the mentoring practice is a hidden element within policy and is an unappreciated aspect of the procedures in place. The following anonymised vignette from recent practice (one of several gathered for the European mentoring study) is employed in this article to illustrate some of the tensions highlighted above.

Kirsty was one of the youngest students in her year and had failed her final primary teaching placement. So at the beginning of the school year when her peers began their teaching careers, Kirsty was anxiously visiting the school where it had been agreed she should have a last chance to meet the QTS requirements to qualify as a teacher. She was to undertake an eight-week period of teaching a Foundation Stage class in a "socially deprived" area.

As Kirsty's university tutor, I would monitor her progress through formal

observations and feedback but also through conversations with her, her mentor, (who was also the class teacher,) the headteacher and other colleagues. According to the report from her failed placement, there were concerns about Kirsty's lack of confidence, classroom presence and behaviour management. Although Kirsty did not criticise the mentor in her previous placement, it did appear that she had been a dominant figure who expected lessons to be delivered in a particular way, according to structured time slots and set plans. Kirsty had struggled to follow this approach and it had challenged the ideological perspective she had begun to develop.

The mentor in the current school was more flexible and, it seems, more open and supportive. Simon was also the class teacher for the class that Kirsty would be teaching and had already begun to forge relationships with the children by the time Kirsty joined them. He helped Kirsty to establish routines and to use a visual timetable and to reflect on the effects these had on the children. He provided a model in which the teacher and children shared responsibility for the classroom and children tidied, planned and organised the environment alongside him. He co-taught with Kirsty and they would engage in respectful, open debates in which the children also participated. As Kirsty gained in confidence, Simon trusted her to manage the learning, but made time each day to talk things through with her. Even though this time was sometimes brief, his guidance helped Kirsty to recognise the successful parts of the day rather than simply aspects that had not gone well. Simon encouraged Kirsty to use her own starting points for the teaching and planning, raising her awareness of the children's enthusiasms and their wider lives.

She experimented with creating a role-play area and when the children's interest in the "cafe" began to fade, she and I talked about maybe changing it to reflect the children's 'popular culture'. She adapted it to a pets' hospital and provided soft toy animals that enabled the children to act out their current favourite TV programme. Not only did the children love their new role-play area but they also added to it! Though Kirsty was a little bemused when they placed a line of chairs on one side of the area,

that soon changed to delight when she realised they were pretending this was a waiting room. The children's involvement led to many spontaneous learning opportunities with excited talk about caring for the specific needs of living creatures and a memorable morning when a teaching assistant brought three real puppies into school.

I talked to her mentor and the headteacher about the positive change in Kirsty over just a few weeks at the school and how they had brought this about. Their view was that they had supported her, had high expectations and expected her to work hard but to succeed. She was allowed to try out ideas, make mistakes and think of ways to overcome obstacles.

Mentoring praxis

Whilst some mentor/ mentee relationships may be riven by issues of power and status or confused by the ambiguities of assessment and support roles, there are those teachers and students who manage to traverse these successfully. In the case of Kirsty's mentor, Simon was confident in his abilities as a teacher of young children but also recognised the potential for his own learning through genuinely collaborative relationships. Not only was there the chance to engage in fresh ideas and experiences but working alongside student teachers offered different perspectives for exploring his practice and for understanding the children in his class

Although some teachers regarded having a student as a burden, Simon embraced the opportunity for teaching and learning with mentees such as Kirsty. Standing back from the pressures of 'goals' provided Simon with the space to reconsider his beliefs about pedagogy, the centrality of social relationships and the affective nature of learning (Papatheodorou 2009). He felt able to be more attentive to the children (Noddings 1984), to focus on their strengths, interests and needs beyond pre-set expectations.

Similarly as a mentor, Simon sought to become attuned to Kirsty in order to support her to achieve the goals she set herself, as well as the formal ones set for her (Noddings 2005).

The mentor in this case study developed a “vision of mentorship as a relationship between persons as different but equal” (Mullen 2005:23; see also Noddings 2005). To achieve this ‘vision’ requires moving from a technical-rationalist approach, dominated by documented criteria and frameworks, to a democratic model of mentoring (Mullen 2005; Fletcher & Mullen 2012; Garvey et al 2014). In this alternative model the student mentee is treated as an equal and the mentor-mentee relationship is based on feminist notions of participation, empowerment and mutuality. It is neither pre-determined nor defined by intended outcomes, yet is conscious of the requirement to attain them, founded on beliefs about learning as a social, organic, located activity.

Beyond the mentor-mentee relationship, mentorship discourse in Simon’s school reflected a collective mindset towards possibilities and the contribution the mentee might make to staff skills and attitudes. Opportunities for discussing experiences with colleagues were thought to offer mutual benefits for pedagogical understanding as well as for a mentee’s perception of self; that is, that a lack of experience did not necessarily equate to a lack of expertise.

It is suggested by Garvey et al (2014) that the mentoring relationship is often most successful when it is voluntary. Nevertheless, it may be worth adding that some teachers require a nudge to appreciate the expertise they have honed over their years of working with and attuning to children with a myriad of talents and dispositions, as well as different home backgrounds. The transition to teaching another adult, albeit perhaps

one who is younger and less experienced in the given context, can be immensely perplexing. Articulating pedagogical and subject knowledge can be challenging, but volunteering to advise and evaluate another's performance may also expose the assessor to unexpected insights into her or his own practice. Holding one's professional abilities and judgments up for scrutiny can seem threatening or rewarding. In its most positive form, becoming a mentor may be embraced as educative even though it may create a sense of dissonance that is only later recognized as adding to the mentor's learning.

Viewed from the edifice of political discourses around teacher competence and grading, of what it means to be 'outstanding' in Ofsted terms, a mentor may envisage their role as being to impart a particular set of skills and ways of performing teaching. For Kirsty, however, the mentee experiences were embedded in mentor beliefs about risk-taking, learning from mistakes and respecting the learner as someone with views, aptitudes and values of her own (Noddings 2005). Kirsty was not intentionally moulded to become a replica of the mentor. She was supported to claim a personal teacher identity (Garvey et al 2014) through processes of trial and error, success and failure, reflection and reflexivity. This reflects feminist praxis in which,

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities (Arendt, 1958: 200).

In a collegiate, reciprocal relationship with her mentor, Kirsty was able to talk openly about her 'errors' and actively explored ideas for responding to the children's dispositions and learning (Noddings 2005). Her experiences were 'of dialogue, collaboration and the development of trusting relationships with colleagues which

support teachers in their quest for...more expanded stories of self” (Warin et al 2006: 243). The mentor created spaces for Kirsty in which she was able to present and view herself as a teacher. In their ad hoc discussions, Simon commented, for example, on the achievement or enthusiasm of particular children that was beyond what had previously been observed, subtly drawing Kirsty’s attention to the impact she was having on the children’s learning (Noddings 2005). During their co-taught ‘open debates’, Simon’s comments were in the style of, ‘So what you are saying, Miss Evans is that when Alfie and Sam looked at our live snail’s eyes they were not like the snail’s in the picture in the story?’. Equally, in their formal meetings he provided a participatory space for Kirsty to confidently analyse events such as Alfie losing his temper, or using the children’s own photographs to extend their communication.

Each space afforded a different perspective of herself as teacher, of the multilayered skills that are intricately linked in the role; the “technologies of the self” that contribute to strengthening identities (ibid) and challenge normative ideologies. The many facets of teaching in the Early Years are reflected in the mentoring provided for Kirsty that nourished her “intellectual, spiritual, social and professional” capacities (Mullen 2005: 30); a moral rather than a mechanistic model of caring and learning (Tronto 1993).

Discussion

The process of mentoring for students exists within a combination of overlapping structures, such as a setting’s policies, university guidance and training specifications. These structures are required to offer a corresponding approach to the competencies outlined within the statutory assessment of teachers’ Standards. Although the provision for mentoring is not uniform, and tensions may arise as a result of interpreting

Standards within a range of local contexts, there must be sufficient evidence for the mentee to show that they meet the Standards to complete the award. The structural frameworks in which mentoring practices exist have clearly defined outcomes in relation to the intended destination of the mentee. The localised, situated learning relationship between the mentor and mentee is therefore contained within the structures that set out the evidence needed to meet teaching competencies.

Traditional teacher mentoring has viewed the mentor as a guide and facilitator for the mentee within the Early Years setting, with the aim of supporting the mentee's capacity to set goals and substantiate targets. What is problematic within this approach is the assumption that knowledge of practice is shared through a hierarchical top-down method of exchange from one more factually informed person to another. The mentee within this model is positioned as having 'deficiencies' within the field that the mentor has responsibility to identify and redress. The role of the mentor as the 'knower' and the mentee as the 'novice' are clearly defined within a binary relationship. This presupposes that knowledge of working with young children is a process of reproducing the skills and methods associated with what is already 'known' as good practice (Dahlberg et al 2006), based on an idea that the knowledge needed to educate and care for young children is 'pre-formed' and universally appropriate to all settings and children.

Noddings' (2005) view that the knowledge a teacher has may not be the same knowledge that the children need could perhaps be transferable to that of a mentor and student teacher. However, the relationship between mentor and mentee is currently based on carving out evidence that fits with privileged views, or 'selecting out' (Ransom 1997) rather than the creation of new localised understandings. A mentoring relationship that foregrounds feminist praxis may challenge dominant discourses and unsettle the status quo.

Arguably, it is possible to correlate the pedagogical approach within the mentoring relationship - one that creates a dualism between mentor and mentee - to similar constructions of adults and children and how they work together within Early Years settings or classrooms. The young child imagined as a future-orientated 'becoming', has been discussed at length in recent sociological accounts of childhood (James et al 1998, Mayall 2002, Prout 2005, Ryan 2011). The positioning of the child as immature and lacking in knowledge means that they require both protection (care), and institutionalised education (Burman 2008). The adult's role, as both developmentally mature, and knowledgeable is to monitor and support the child in response to external structures that exist to regulate and monitor provision. Knowledge about young children as developmental beings is contained within and described by the structures that surround both adults and children. Existing within the same educational structures where external knowledge is required to be mirrored by the learner, mentees are not only reconstructing themselves as the 'adult knower' of young children, but also as the immature apprentice. Much as children within the Early Years framework are assessed as 'ideal' learners (Bradbury 2013) in relation to how well they progress towards the ELGs outlined in the EYFS (DfE 2014), the mentee's acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary to evidence the teaching competencies is also measured. Both pedagogical structures are compartmentalised into linear, developmental and stratified processes of learning.

This organisation of mentoring creates learning relationships within early childhood settings and classrooms that are teleological and data driven (Roberts-Holmes 2014). Both mentoring and pedagogical practice are mutually supportive of each other in this respect. For example, evidence used to demonstrate a child's levels of progress, may be used to support a mentee's own abilities in meeting teaching requirements.

In the documentation that exists to support mentoring programmes, mentors are encouraged to build trust and relate sensitively to their mentees using active listening techniques (CUREE 2005). Relationships are perceived as strategies to build the mentee's progression to what is deemed to be 'successful practice' which the mentor, who has 'high quality' teaching knowledge (Teach First 2012), is in a position to assess, appraise and accredit. Teaching professionals are encouraged to become mentors as a way of evidencing their own continuing professional development (e.g. Teach First Mentor Recognition Framework), a responsibility in schools that is becoming increasingly incentivised both internally and externally. The recent introduction of performance related pay and conditions for teachers (DFE 2013) in schools mean that appraisals of teachers' work now have financial consequences. Teachers who demonstrate a successful mentoring role in school can use this as proof of their continued development, which may lead to pay awards.

A combination of school expectations of children's progress against national requirements, audited by the regulatory framework of Ofsted, and filtered down to expectations of children's progress within the frameworks of learning in early years, may lead to the valuing of a reductionist approach towards mentoring practices.

A feminist praxis perspective of moral interdependence has the potential to lead to different models of mentoring practice, just as alternative views of young children as competent and capable (Rinaldi 2005) have led to different pedagogical approaches in the Early Years. Both unsettle the received wisdom of some current mentoring arrangements, particularly in relation to forms of assessment, and dominant discursive accounts of knowledge, learning and status.

Conclusion

The context for mentoring trainee early childhood educators is filled with tensions, including assessment regimes that conform to constructs of learners and learning that have been described as reductionist, normalising and linear. The practice of appointing senior colleagues as mentors is both advantageous and problematic. Seniority and high professional status are not automatically synonymous with Early Years expertise or the ability to mentor well. Seniority is particularly problematic in a sector that has traditionally been viewed as low status and in which professionalisation has been externally imposed and according to predefined, masculinist (Lynch 2009) Standards that are equated with 'professionalism'. The value attributed to formalised assessment processes and practices reflects economic drivers for public investment in ECEC and the perceived need for accountability in 'cost-benefit' terms. These divert attention away from the diversity and subjectivity of learners and learning towards uniform, objectified, quantifiable outcome measures that stand in sharp contrast to the principles that have underpinned early childhood practice for two centuries in England.

An alternative model (Mullen 2005) of mentoring relationships discussed in this paper draws on the perspectives offered by Noddings, Tronto and hooks that foreground values of caring, attentiveness and receptivity. Such mutually respectful values afford opportunities for situated reflection and interrogation of dominant discourses in relation to education and adult and child learners. Although primarily focused on better understanding young children's learning and the role adults play in these experiences, mentoring discourse that aligns to feminist praxis can simultaneously attend to the effects of a standardisation agenda. This is dependent on mentors' willingness to adopt a person-centred, relational pedagogy that views mentees as 'different but equal'; to take risks; be attentive to power dynamics, and welcome the challenges to their own assumptions. They embrace the opportunity to co-construct knowledge and collaborate

with mentees in critical reflection to translate that knowledge into transformational action.

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www.weiterbildungsinitiative.de/uploads/media/WiFF_Studie_22_Fachpraktische_Ausbildung.pdf

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