**Co-constructions, co-performances and co-reflections in early years qualitative research**

Abstract

This study investigates our role as early years researchers in qualitative data analysis. We draw on our doctoral studies to address how the co-construction, co-performance and co-reflection of narratives elicit deeper and new understandings of early years workers in England, and how our life stories are co-produced through narrative inquiry. Employing a constructionist approach and building on Buitelaar’s (2006) theorisation of I-positions and the multi-vocal ‘self’, we explore how narratives are co-constructed and co-performed between the researched and researcher in relation to the ‘self’ and master narratives of culture, time and place. Data were collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews involving 50 early years workers and 17 nurseries situated in the South East of England. By ‘co-reflecting’ on how the data was analysed, we discussed the ways in which we and our participants are simultaneously positioned within social categories of intersectionality, such as gender, social class, mother and worker. Our reflections offer a broader understanding of how qualitative research can enrich existing knowledge of how early years workers and their work are constructed in England.

***Introduction***

The composition of the Early Childhood Care and Education [ECEC] workforce in England is highly gendered and continues to be the most female dominated of all occupations in the UK, with 96 per cent of the workforce comprising of women (SMS, 2020). In comparison with other European countries, especially where the popular belief is that Nordic countries have more gender equal society, the percentage of men working in the nurseries is also low with 4% of men working in the sector (Moss and Urban, 2017). Similarly, in former communist countries such as in the SSSR, Yugoslavia and Hungary, where women’s participation in the workforce is seen as an important principle of the equality of women the ECEC workforce is predominantly women (Mikuska and Raffai, 2018). Moss (2006; 2017) argues that a highly gendered ECEC workforce on low pay reflects a historic discourse of a ‘substitute mother’, where the only requirement to work with young children is that of having a ‘maternal instinct’. For example, during and after World War 2, there has been a powerful maternal discourse about the role of mothers in caring and educating their infants which reconfirms the long standing assumptions that motherhood is a sufficient grounding for working with young children (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015). This assumption was culturally perceived since, in the post 1945 UK welfare state, there was a clear gender differentiated model of family life, in which men were ‘bread-winners’ and women were full-time carers, with women and children financially dependent upon men. Therefore, it is not surprising that motherhood and women’s work in ECEC have long influenced early childhood policy and practice. Vincent and Braun 92010) argued that there is a common view that paid caring is a derivation of mothering, a set of nurturing skills that comes ‘naturally’ to women/mothers. Osgood (2012) further explains that this discourse makes the nursery work to be seen as an extension of the role of the mother.

Since the Care Standard Act 2000, all early years providers in England have been required to register and be subjected to inspection by Ofsted. Vincent and Ball (2006), however, stated that the private day nursery sector remains a competitive, but fragmented market. In England, the overwhelming majority (78%) of nurseries are private (profit-making), voluntary and independent (Robert-Holmes, 2012), for which the requirements in group settings is that the manager must hold at least a full and relevant level 3 qualification and at least half of all other staff must hold at least a full and relevant level 2 qualification (DfE, 2014a; 2017a). There has been much debate as to who can work with children, and what kind of skills and qualifications nursery workers need. For example, taking recommendations for a more systematic approach towards professional development was made in the 2012 Nutbrown Review (2012). These debates are based largely on the nature of ECEC policies that seek to ‘*improve the quality of early years training’* (DfE, 2017b:2) and which *‘set the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe’*. In order to meet these requirements, Moss (2006: 36) described the nursery worker as a ‘technician’, who has:

… varying levels of skill and qualification. But their role is to apply a defined set of technologies through regulated processes to produce pre-specified and measurable outcomes.

This type of work is in contrast to the discourse of the ‘substitute mother’ as previously explained. Moss’s (2006) ideas of the ‘technician’ link closely to Osgood’s (2005; 2010) analysis of developments in the early years workforce. Early years workers have been subject to increased state regulation and accountability, resulting in an increased workload and emphasis on ‘technical competence and performativity’ (Osgood, 2012: 146).

***Context of the research***

Both our doctoral studies explored workers experiences within the field of ECEC in the South East of England. Sandra’s research focused on early years workers’ understandings of poverty while Eva’s research focused on the relationship between professionalisation and emotional labour when working with children. Early years worker is used generically throughout the paper to refer to someone who works within an early years provision, providing education and care for children from birth to five years. Sandra’s research investigates how poverty in early childhood is understood drawing on a case study of two maintained nursery schools with children centres and daycare provision in the South-East of England (Lyndon, 2019). In this study, 38 participants took part including teachers (with qualified teacher status), nursery nurses, nursery assistants, family support workers and setting managers. Participants’ qualifications ranged from level 3 to level 6 and above, with 44% holding at least a level 6 qualification. All participants described themselves as female and all but one described themselves as White British.

Eva’s research focused on the relationship between professionalisation of the ECEC workforce and emotional labour when working with children. Her work also explores how early years work(ers) are constructed in the current political, economic and societal context in England. In this research 22 early years workers were involved across fifteen different settings who directly work or have worked with babies and young children in England. The aim was to investigate the growing concern that early years work is continuously considered as a ‘mother’s job’ and that the work is ‘just babysitting’ with little respect, lack of professional recognition, and limited reward through remuneration. The majority of participants were White British, twenty were women and two were men; and their ages varied from 20 to 53 years. Participants’ highest qualifications ranged from level 2 to level 7, with 18% holding a level 6 qualification or above. They job roles also varied, their titles were: nursery helper, nursery practitioner, room leader, deputy manager, manager, and owner.

Both research projects employed qualitative semi-structured interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted “as a conversation between two equals” [the researcher and participant] which is both a collaborative and communicative event (Ellis and Berger, 2003: 472). Participants were asked a small number of questions designed to elicit personal narratives and personal understandings of poverty and professional practice. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Digital audio recordings were made and all interviews were transcribed using full verbatim. Ethical approval was granted by the researchers’ respective universities and informed consent was gained from all participants for both projects. To protect identities pseudonyms have been used for all participants referred to in the chapter.

***Theoretical approach: a constructionist narrative approach***

Both studies employed a constructionist narrative approach where stories are understood as co-constructed or dialogically constructed between the participant and the researcher with elements of constant change. Esin et al. (2014: 205) state that “rather than reading them [the stories] as finished products of particular circumstances they may change over time”. Esin et al. (2014: 204) further argue that data analysis is conceptualised as an ongoing complex process through which multiple layers of “told small stories” focusing on “the participants’ self-generating meaning” are considered. An important part of the approach was the power relation between the researched and researcher, the data and its interpretation. The meanings of narratives were not only co-constructed by us as researchers but also co-performed by our participants. All these features of the narrative analysis are part of the construction of subjectivities. Weedon (1997) offered a clear account of ‘subjectivity’ through which the experiences of early years worker can be examined in current UK society, and this was drawn upon as follows:

The terms ‘subjectivity’ is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world (Weedon, 1997: 32).

Weedon (1997) emphasised that forms of subjectivity are produced historically but open to modifications due to the change of the discursive fields within which they operate. Subjects and subjectivity come into existence during the interview process and it is this relationship between narratives and subjectivities that are of interest.

***Small stories***

To address how narratives are performed and co-constructed we employed Bamberg and Geogakopoulou’s (2008) concept of small stories. As they point out ‘small stories’ are best understood as a departure from more traditional narrative approaches which they refer to as ‘big stories’ – such as Labov’s (1997) understanding of narrative as a structural ordering of events. In contrast, according to Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008: 385), small stories are conceptualised as ‘interactive engagements’ where people “construct a sense of who they are”, enabling a focus on how characters are positioned by the narrator. Interactive engagements facilitate co-construction on multiple levels - how the teller co-constructions their narrative together with the listener [in this case the researcher] but also how the story is co-constructed by the researcher in connection with their own life experiences. On a wider level co-construction also includes how narratives connect to master narratives in society - those which are accepted within society as ‘normative’ and are so embedded in everyday life that they are rendered invisible (Harris et al., 2001). Nutbrown (2011: 243) points out the use of small stories enables the researcher to take a ‘reflexive stance’ ‘providing an opportunity, self-consciously to ask questions, give account, wonder, push and prod’. Therefore, employing a small story approach was a way of addressing how early years workers’ narratives are co-performed within both the local context, the ‘doing’ of the narrative, as well as the wider context - how early years workers are co-constructed within the site of ECEC.

***I-positions and intersectionality***

To explore how early years workers co-perform their narratives – constructing a sense of ‘self’ and ‘other’- Buitelaar’s (2006) concept of the ‘dialogical self’ and the use of I-positions was employed. This approach affords a way of exploring the intersection between early years workers’ lived experiences and how these might both embody and counter master narratives. Buitelaar (2006) suggests that people shift between their different I-positions telling stories about their past, future and present as a way of making sense of their lives. For example, an early years worker might speak from multiple positions – that of mother, professional worker, volunteer and migrant. An analysis of I-positions affords how individual voices may or may not conflict or how one voice or collective voice may dominate. This understanding of a ‘dialogical self’ draws on the work of Hermans (2001: 248) who conceptualises the ‘self’ as a “dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions” moving between different spatial positions in time and situation. The dialogical self is an ‘embodied self’, located in a variety of positions. The ‘I’is able ‘imaginatively’ to give each position a voice, establishing dialogical relations between positions. In other words, the self is ‘multi-voiced’ and the ‘person can act as if he or she *were* the other and other *were* him-or herself’ creating alternative perspectives on the world and self (Hermans, 2001: 250).  This approach enables narratives to be put in dialogue with each other and to understand the ways in which dialogues operate between the personal and the surrounding social world that “produce, consume, silence and contest” realities (Esin et al., 2014: 205).

Understandings of the ‘dialogical self’ and I-positions are strongly linked to the concept of intersectionality (Buitelaar, 2006). Intersectionality was originally used by Crenshaw (1989) as a way of exploring the multi-dimensional discrimination experienced by black women in the workplace in the U.S.A. She argues that the intersectional experience - the combination of race, social class and gender - is greater than the sum of the parts (Crenshaw, 1989). Phoenix (2004: 76), building on the work of Crenshaw (1989), conceptualises intersectionality as:

*The complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue the multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts.*

Her definition suggests that intersectionality can be used to explore how any group of people operate dynamically with each other within a specific site making “visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it” (Phoenix, 2006: 187).   Czarniawska (2004) claims that by using narratives as a tool to investigate human experiences, such as gender, social inequalities and migration, opens up an interdisciplinary space for narrative analysis where the contradictions within the narratives are co-constructed.

***Performances and I-positions***

In this next section Sandra and Eva give examples from their research of how I-positions can be used to analyse interviews with three early years workers working in the South-East of England – Sally, Helen and Becky. These three particular examples were chosen as there were commonalities in terms of their intersectionality – they were all women, mothers and early years workers. However, as the analysis of their narratives illustrates the ways in which understandings of their experiences are co-constructed are very different. The first example is Sandra’s analysis of Sally’s narrative. Sally is a qualified teacher who had worked for a number of years at a maintained nursery school. The second example is Eva’s analysis of Helen and Becky’s narratives. Both Helen and Becky are in senior positions at privately run nursery schools. Their analysis builds on Ellis and Berger’s (2003: 471) theorisation of collaborative interviewing and how analysis of the “researcher’s self in interviews deepens and enriches our understanding” through attention to the co-production of meanings and emotional responses. Eva and Sandra reflect on how the participants shift between and sometimes hold contradictory I-positions - in relation to performing being a mother, worker, professional, student and nursery owner.

Initially Sandra and Eva individually analysed their own data. The analytical process involved a full transcript of the interview followed by several in depth readings. In the first reading a ‘free annotation’ approach was taken where anything which particularly ‘struck us’ was noted. This enabled us to be open to different interpretations and multiple meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). This was followed by an analysis of ‘small stories’ with a focus on ‘What story are they telling? How do stories get interrupted or diverted? How are characters constructed? A summary was made of the ‘narrative threads’ [the main ideas we identified within the narratives] which informed the subheadings for the presentation of our individual analysis below [for further explanation see Lyndon (2018).

In the final stage Eva and Sandra shared their original analysis of individual data with each other and then met to co-reflect on their responses. Their ‘co-reflections’ are drawn from digital recordings of these discussions and discuss how their own I-positions inform their interpretations of their participants’ narratives - thus offering a further layer of co-construction.

***Sandra’s analysis of Sally’s narrative – performing the ‘good’ mother, worker, student and professional***

I have chosen several small stories from my analysis of Sally’s narrative which illustrate how she shifts between I-positions and sometimes holds contradictory I-positions in relation to being a mother, worker, student and professional. To demonstrate the complexity of her I-positions and how these interconnects. I have focused on how Sally constructs herself and others in regard to poverty, parenting and social mobility.

***Poverty***

Sally’s understanding of poverty is complex – sympathising with some and not with others. Her understanding reflects master narratives of deserving and undeserving poor – those who are deemed as victims of circumstances outside their control and those who are held responsible for their circumstances. These understandings intersect in complicated ways with her different I-positions. Overall her understanding of poverty is ‘absolute’ – not having access to the basic necessities to sustain life. This notion is alluded to throughout her narrative

*And when we talk about poverty now, I always think it is relative if you look at children who are poor in this country …most of them aren’t that poor if you look at refugees you know in other places*

Here she makes a clear distinction between the family who are living in absolute poverty – with nowhere to live and not enough food – and the family who cannot afford the latest trending toy. Her understanding of poverty as absolute is strongly connected to her I-positions. Speaking from her I position as a teacher she makes it clear that if a child was in extreme poverty she would be more sympathetic:

*If I see a child you know who’s clearly not fed very well you just want to take them home and bath them and feed them, don’t you? If just brings out that instinct in you really want to look after and help them […] so I have a lot of sympathy with people who are really really struggling that are cold and hungry you know.*

*Performing the good mother*

The concern Sally demonstrates for the child in ‘real’ poverty is cognisant of her I-position of a mother – wanting to care and look after the child as she did with her own children. Throughout her narrative Jackie maintains a strong I position of a mother who puts her children’s needs first. This small story illustrates the complex intersections between poverty and her I-positions of mother and that of worker:

*When I had my own children, we weren’t very well off at all […] we did decide that I’d stay at home and survive on one wage and that wasn’t easy but that was a choice we made because as long as we could feed and house the children which we fortunately could…and then we were prepared not have other things, like we didn’t have a car and a telly and we didn’t have a lot of those sort of things […] but I still didn’t think we were poor then.*

Sally performs the ‘good’ mother, one who puts the needs of her children first making personal sacrifices – both financial and material - for the sake of the family. She emphasises how her decision to stay at home was a ‘choice’ and is careful to distance herself from those in poverty by explaining that although they ‘weren’t very well off’, they were not ‘poor’. Those affected by poverty often try to individualise, blame and shame others in poverty as a form of protection (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). The way that Sally insists they were not ‘poor’ is perhaps a way of countering master narratives of blame. In another small story Sally explains that her decision to stay at home and look after the children was a limited choice:

*If I’d gone to work I couldn’t of earnt very much, I couldn’t have afforded the childcare anyway but our parents were still working at that point and they couldn’t help so…..*

Sally alludes to structural inequalities related to low pay and the prohibitive cost of childcare – thus challenging political master narratives that ‘work always pays’ [DWP, 2010]. As she points out work was not a practical option due to the prohibitive costs of childcare.

*Performing the professional*

In tension with Sally’s I-position of a mother is her I-position as a worker and her journey to becoming a qualified teacher. After her children started school she decided to pursue her ambition of becoming a teacher. Her decision was informed by wanting to be more financially secure as well as her love of studying:

*I also felt financially insecure… I’ve got a supportive husband and parents who would always support me if they could but thought what if something happened ? I wouldn’t be able to look after my children enough so I need to earn more as well so there was a financial driver there as well as a kind of intellectual interest*

Her small story illustrates the financial precarity of motherhood especially for lone mothers and how this intersects with issues of work (Millar and Ridge, 2013).

Sally’s I position about becoming a professional is strongly shaped by her family and their intergenerational pursuit of learning.

*My mum pretty much was a stay at home mum yer. She got a degree from the open university when she was in her 50s. […] My dad was very, a very clever man. He never had any academic qualifications but he managed to work his way up through a company into quite a senior position […]. He was a very avid reader […] as I said before they both grew up in proper poverty really in terms of finance.*

Upward social mobility, the extent to which people might experience gains in economic or social status within a life-time or between parents and children is low in the UK (OECD, 2018; SMC, 2019). In contrast to many in the UK Sally and her family have experienced both intergenerational (between parents and children) and intragenerational (within her life time) social mobility – describing how her father worked hard to move the family out of poverty. In her own way Sally has also pursued social mobility by working hard to become a qualified teacher. Her story of social mobility reflects a master narrative of meritocracy – a society where individuals succeed according to merit and their own hard work.

*Master narratives of neoliberalism – Sandra, I think the beginning of the sentence is needs to be linked to MT*

In contrast to her personal story of social mobility and the success this has afforded herself and her family she is critical of the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s reflected in policies which were introduced by the then Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Neoliberalism, a political move away from “welfare provision towards privatisation and deregulation” (Jones, 2015: 28), has arguably been a master narrative embodied within UK politics for several decades. In the small story below Sally talks about how since the 1980s there has been a political shift away from social responsibility for others towards individualism:

*And it’s just sad […] it can happen to anyone that they can lose everything for whatever reason, not many people choose that as a lifestyle […] but just listening to people talking sometimes get this impression that…………yer, that it’s people’s own fault because it’s all about looking after number one… going back to the 80s and blame Margaret Thatcher for a lot of that again I’m afraid*

In this small story Sally’s contests the rise of neoliberalism. She challenges the idea that poverty is the fault of individuals and highlights the loss of societal responsibility for others. Her political stance intersects closely with her own personal narrative about her family:

*They sort of pulled themselves away from their background in financial terms but they you know kept in contact with everyone*

In this small story she contests the idea that financial success or social mobility is individualistic – instead suggesting that you can be successful financially and remain part of your community.

In contrast she demonstrates less sympathy for those who get into debt through mismanaging their money:

*There just seems to be a different attitude, doesn’t there? To some extent, I don’t know, it’s because I’m getting old! I think we grew up,****I grew up****being taught a very strong sort of moral way, you don’t borrow money, you don’t…and kind of stuck to it actually …and I think a lot of people haven’t had that and so they do get themselves into a bit of a pickle sometimes*

In this small story Sally compares those who borrow money and end up in debt to her construct of herself as a responsible mother – one who works hard and lives within her means. Her story serves to ‘other’ those in ‘financial trouble’ constructing them as financially irresponsible. Overall her understanding of poverty reflects moral master narratives of deserving and undeserving poor – with those who experience extreme poverty through no fault of their own as deserving and those who lack financial restraint as undeserving.

***Co-reflection - reflecting on Sandra’s analysis***

Eva and Sandra’s co-reflection on the analysis of Sally’s narrative highlights how for Eva ‘gender’ and taking a feminist perspective is missing from the analysis. As Eva points out:

*It’s an additional layer even though I’m conscious that examining and researching the early childhood workforce it’s nearly impossible without applying the feminist approach. This is for so many reasons: ‘who are the workforce?’ ‘what are their experiences working in the nursery?’*

In the UK the early years workforce is predominantly female and characterised by low pay, precarious work, lack of opportunity for progression and pay rise (Payler and Locke, 2013; DfE, 2014; SMS, 2020). For Eva Sally’s narrative is saturated with gender. Cameron et al. (1999) argued that the meaning of ‘gendered’ operates at two levels, one which is individualised and one that is institutional. The individualised level is about what nursery workers bring to the nursery through their gender identity, their roles and the ways of being man or woman. At institutional level, the gendered understanding is embedded within historical and pedagogical understandings of why childcare exists. Therefore ‘gendered’ refers to the gender element of the nursery work which is often invisible. Eva points out how Sally appears unaware at times of the ‘gendered’ tensions between her I-positions of mother and early years worker. Miller (2012) discusses how early years workers are subject to normative middle-class gendered constructs of the ‘good’ mother, one who is selfless and available to meet their children’s needs. Eva points out how Sally is complicit with this normative master narrative – she does not question or discuss with her husband why she should be the one to stay at home to look after the children. She does not contest the sacrifice she has made because she has constructed herself within a master middle class narrative of the ‘good mother’ – someone who puts the care of her children first. Osgood (2005) stipulates how for many working in the early years sector is a default career - an unskilled and low status ‘feminised’ job performed by women which is an extension of the mothering role. Eva discusses how this is the case for Sally and how her motivation to become qualified is driven more by her financial insecurities, about something happening to her husband rather than an active choice to work with children. Despite a political master narrative that work is a route out of poverty (DWP, 2010) - for many parents who are working full time with pre-school age children work does not pay – with the cost childcare often being more than their mortgage payments (Coleman and Cottell, 2019).

*Eva and Sandra’s positionality – ‘default’ career and social mobility*

In this next section we reflect our positionality to Sally’s narrative and argue that through our reflexivity we are better able to understand the hidden meanings of our participant’s narrative (Nutbrown, 2011). Eva has a strong emotional reaction to Sally’s narrative – particularly the small story about her supportive husband and parents. Eva commented that: *In contrast to Sally, I was born and raised in former Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the Yugoslavian war in 1992 I came to live and work in the UK. After giving birth to my two children, I ended up raising them myself which meant I had no support from my husband nor from my parents who remained in the war zone in Serbia. Sally’s small story is a reminder to me of how hard and challenging it was living on £5 a week in a room with two children. This was the time when the DfES (1997: 2) announced that*

*We want to improve the overall image of the childcare and play work sector…It has much to offer to the right people…lone parents are a key potential source of childcare and play workers…advice, guidance and support to help them care successfully for their own children and help them to build on their parenting skills so they can take up employment looking after other children.*

*It happened that of the ‘right people’ was me. I ended up working in a nursery by ‘default’ due to having a natural predisposition determined by my gender and motherhood. Dual marginalisation followed – first I was migrant single mother, and second, I was doing a job which was not viewed at the time as ‘real work’ (Osgood, 2012). It took me years to become proud of having worked in the early years sector.*

*Sandra’s experience of* growing up in a working-class family has a strong resonance with that of Sally’s. In the same way as Sally, Sandra was also the first generation in her family to go to University and the first person to train to be a teacher. On the one hand Sally and Sandra share the same story:

We are both of a similar age, both decided to be teachers and both came from humble beginnings …however, I don’t buy into the social mobility master narrative – it just doesn’t work– Sally and me were the lucky ones if you like… we escaped but many don’t ….it doesn’t narrow the gap.

However, as Sandra points out their stories are the exception – very few in the UK experience upward social mobility and the gap between rich and poor in the UK remains wider than many countries in Europe (SMC, 2019).

***Eva’s analysis of Becky’s narrative - performing the mother***

My first analysis is drawn from my interview with Becky who had started a private nursery with her mother after giving birth to her fourth child. When pregnant with her fifth child, she decided to further her early years qualification and enrolled to study at a higher education institution. Her interview demonstrates the ways in which Becky shifts her I-positions in relation to being a mother, worker, student and professional. In Becky’s small story the I-position of being a mother is a way to gain power and deal with uncertainty:

*Being a student, I found it difficult because I’m always the person in charge, and you go into a classroom, and suddenly, I am not in charge and you’re very much at the bottom of the pile, and I think I was older as well in group where there were lots of younger students I felt a bit uncomfortable to start with…. I think I probably had a bit of lack of tolerance for some of them, and I wanted to look after them, I wanted them to do well when they necessarily didn’t me want to do well. But then I found myself turning into a mother role which was very interesting because I didn’t think it will happen. Yeah, it actually happened.*

*Eva: Can you tell me a bit more about this?*

*For example, some of the girls came to me to ask for help especially with their assignment, but they also asked me for a plaster or a hairband, or tissue. They have looked intently at me because they knew I have young kids and because of this you must have a tissue in your bag.*

Butler’s (1999) view on the maternal is that it is also performative, where individuals’ subjectivity changes over time and through the ways in which individuals are positioned and positioning themselves. Butler’s (1999) theorisation offers a way of understanding Becky’s performance. For Becky, the motherhood experience (she has five children, with the oldest being 12 years old) has helped her overcome the issue of “not being in control” in the classroom. By *performing* a mothering attitude towards younger classmates, Becky found a way in which she can gain confidence from being a student. Becky was viewed as “knowledgeable” by her classmates by seeking advice from her. As Wodak and Meyer (2009:34) state “knowledge is conditional, i.e. its validity depends on people’s location in history, geography, class relation and so on”. As knowledge and identity are strongly connected, the knowledge of “mothering” was (re)constructed by the university experience. Becky’s ‘I’ position of a mother helped her to made her feel that she possesses a specific experience of how to help her classmates.

***Becky - performing the professional worker***

In the following small story, Becky spoke about how she felt being a mother and early years practitioner. She said:

*Because I am a mother, I am a better practitioner…my emotions are totally different to someone who hasn’t got children but who works as a practitioner with lots of children because I see it as the other’s (mother) perspective and I think that I am more emotional probably because I am a parent, more so…I feel guilt that I kind of left him (child in the nursery), as I haven’t been there, I haven’t read or focused on him; I probably could have helped him, and perhaps, other practitioners haven’t so much.*

Here, the discourse of motherhood is used to construct the image of an ideal early years professional; in other words, being a mother is the same (or better) to provide quality and good early years services. For Becky, being a mother entitled her to say that she was better than other nursery workers who were not mothers. Becky’s ‘I’ position of a mother made her feel that she possesses a specific knowledge of how to help the children in the nursery. Through Becky’s account it is possible to discern the intersection between mother and good practitioner. Lawler (2008) clarified this point by stating that multiple identities coexist and that social class identities are marked out as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Here, the “mother” is seen as doing right things, and this becomes the hegemonic norm.

***Eva’s analysis of Helen’s narrative – performing the mother***

Helen worked in a nursery as a deputy manager. After giving birth to her son, Helen started her ECEC career as a volunteer in a nursery where her son attended. Soon after finishing her vocational qualification which entailed her working with children, she was offered a job as a room leader, and then as a deputy nursery manager. Her interview demonstrates the ways in which Helen negotiated her I-positions between being a mother and deputy nursery manager. For Helen, it was very important to be seen as a professional:

*I didn’t want anyone else to think ‘oh because she has got a son there’, ‘he is sitting on her lap again’, or this sort of things… and because other people had children in the setting and they would say ‘oh look, she is with her daughter all day and she is following her around’. So, I was quite conscious to keeping that professional and personal space more separate you know. And slowly my role turned into supporting the staff especially the younger practitioners who really behaved like herding cats to show them how to behave in front of the parents. I thought I can show by my actions and by modelling how to behave [and] I hoped they would learn.*

The notion of professionalism is a well debated topic within the early years context. Since the introduction of the Early Years Professional Status in 2006 and Early Years Teachers Status in 2013 (NCTL, 2013), many academics argued for the wider professional recognition and professionalisation of the early years workforce (Miller, 2008; Osgood, 2010, 2012). The quote suggests an intersection between the private and public split which is an ongoing post-structuralist feminist debate between dualism of rational/emotional, mind/body, public/private (Hochschild, 1983; Leathwood and Hay, 2009). Within Helen’s narrative this split is clear as she is explaining the way of separating the maternal self from the professional self. At work, Helen is performing the professional early years worker, who is consciously maintaining space between the two ‘selves’. Helen positioned herself as a manager as she felt she needed to show and model to younger practitioners what in her view was professional practice. Such behaviour presumes that it is possible to regulate and control someones behaviour rationally. This is in line with Vincent and Ball’s (2006:12) finding that the mother (private) – carer (public) relationship is one “of opposing and rival” viewpoint.

***Eva’s analysis of Becky’s narrative – performing emotional practice***

The split between maternal and professional is also present in Becky’s small story. Becky explains that achieving the balance between the personal self and professional self was an emotional practice:

*I think you know… I work with my emotions. What I do, my work with children and so many difficult children yeah…with everything… wear my heart on my sleeve…but it is different when I work (than being a mum). At work, the children aren’t yours, and you can do so much with them, but I do feel that you are forming such a close relationship with them, especially with some of those children (in need)…*

This small story indicates the role of emotions in professional work where the maternal discourse is mobilised to compare her feelings for her own children with those of the children she cares for. Hochschild (1983) coined the term “emotional labour” claiming that a feeling or emotional response is self-induced that provides the basis of “acting” or management of emotions. She also argues that emotional cues may be among the most important in human interaction as in the above extract where Becky uses a metaphor “I wear my heart on my sleeve” indicating that the emotional performance and investment in her job was an important part of her life. Limited attention has been given to emotional labour in the field of ECEC – particularly early years workers’ emotional investment in their professional work, which becomes embodied as we agued elsewhere (Mikuska and Lyndon, 2018). Mikuska and Fairchild (2020) further developed the notion of emotional labour in ECEC practices highlighting the unrecognised part of emotional work that nursery workers are engaged with. For Becky, the unrecognised emotionality goes beyond the nursery work environment – particularly for those children in need. This is a different perspective of ECEC professional work to be considered, the unrecognised aspect of emotional investment of early years workers (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020).

***Co-reflection - reflecting on Eva’s analysis***

Our co-reflection of Eva’s analysis reveals a deeper understanding of the tensions and intersectionality between Becky and Helen’s different I-positions – something which Sandra finds particularly fascinating:

*What is really interesting […] is the tension between them [the I-positions] because that’s the beauty of the I-positions because it’s not so much seeing it in different ways but actually how those are in tension with each other and can contradict and I think that’s what I find fascinating ..because they don’t fit comfortably.*

For Sandra this is very evident in the way the two early years workers tried to reconcile the tensions between how they perform the roles of mother, worker, professional and student:

*[The narrative is] very strong on intersectionality and how we sort of shift and the tensions between [the different I-positions] (Sandra).*

In the first story Becky is trying to make the transition to being a student whilst at the same time trying to hold on to her I-position as a manager and how she addresses the tension between those two roles is by becoming the ‘mother’ of the group. As Eva points out the intersectionality between the competing roles highlights how Becky gains power within the group by adopting the role of the ‘mother’ even though she does not have a ‘management’ role as a student. Eva draws on Butler’s (1999) notion of performativity to explain this:

*I can link Becky’s behaviour to performativity as this is how I understood Butler’s performativity. Butler said ‘bodies speak without uttering’ so you are performing who you really are and for Becky, she couldn’t help herself as she performed the: ‘I’m a boss’ ‘I’m telling you’. She’s not performing the motherhood, instead she’s performing the ‘manager’, the ‘I’m in charge’ role.*

In a similar way Sandra identifies tensions in the narratives between the personal and professional. For example, in the small story about Helen and her son - Helen tries to reconcile the tensions between her roles as a mother and a worker. Sandra agrees with Eva that for Helen it is impossible to separate the roles of mother and a worker at work. She draws on Page’s (2018) concept of ‘professional love’, the difficulties that early years workers may experience with expressing emotions and affections for the young children in their care to try and understand the relationship between an early years worker who is caring for their own child in their work setting:

*…so that also makes me think about Jools Page and professional love and how are you a professional with your own child? How do you separate that? How do you create that professional/personal space when at the end of the day that is your son or daughter there - I don’t know how that is possible because you can’t separate the professional and the personal they are interlinked [Sandra].*

Another aspect highlighted in the co-reflection is the emotion created by the tensions between the participants’ different I-positions. For Sandra this was particularly evident with Helen:

*I think it’s really interesting what she is saying here because you ‘ve got these sort of tensions – “working with her emotions” …"so many different children”… “wear my heart on my sleeve” …"but It’s different when I work than being a mother” ..but everything she is saying* ***is*** *about being a mother […] so it’s a real contradiction – she’s trying to keep the distance [from the children] but she can’t can she?*

Even though Helen tries to draw a line between her positions of mother and worker she recognises at the same time that these are inextricably linked.

***Reflection on motherhood***

*In this section we reflect on our emotional reaction to Becky’s story about being a mother. Eva’s positionality – being a mother*

In discussion with Sandra I reflected on my experiences as a mother. My reaction to Becky’s comment was different to Sandra’s:

*I never connected the two – being a mother and being a teacher and mother. It is perhaps due to my upbringing. For me, these are two separate roles, built on separate body of skills and knowledge. By living and working in England I learnt that working in the nursery you don’t need a higher qualification, so for me this is then natural that the two roles [mother v nursery worker] are interwoven. In Yugoslavia if you want to work with children regardless of their age, you have to have a degree.*

I never felt that I am better nursery worker because I am a mother; I reflect more about this theme since several participants in my research talked about this phenomena.

*Sandra’s positionality – not being a**mother*

In my discussion with Eva I comment:

*I react very strongly to this one – ‘because I’m a mother I’m a better practitioner’ – [does that mean that] because I’m not a mother I’m less of a practitioner because I haven’t had any children? I found that personally offensive because who is somebody else to say to me that my emotions are different (maybe they are) does that make me a worse practitioner? Does that make me less emotional? Does that make me less of a person? Because through no choice of my own because I would have liked to have been a mother – I can’t read that without having an emotional reaction and feeling …it actually makes me feel cross.*

Although I have worked for many years with children and families - I sometimes feel judged by others for not being mother, such as people assuming that I have chosen my career over having children or somehow, I do not understand as much as someone who is a mother. Eva and I reflected further on this idea and how there are a drive for some early years workers to become ‘professionalised’. In connection with this idea I told Eva a small story about another early years worker called Sarah:

*I had another person who I interviewed and she said ‘What do I know I’m just a mummy?’ so she says she had to get trained to become a professional so people would take her seriously…*

In contrast to Becky, who gained status in the group from performing the ‘mother’, for Sarah being a mother was not valued – it was becoming professionalised which raised her status so that she would be taken seriously. However, for many early years workers becoming professionalised does not address the issue of low pay and status. It is difficult to progress in the early years sector and early years qualifications do not receive the same recognition in terms of status or pay as those in similar sectors (Payler and Locke, 2013).

***Conclusion***

This paper resonates with Nutbrown (2011) self-reflective qualitative research design in which she reflects on the usefulness of reflexivity urging for more reflective enquire from the ECEC community. Building on Nutbrown’s suggestion, we argue that co-constructions and co-reflections help making some important aspects of someone personal life explicit and visible. We demonstrated that our life experiences intersect with participants small stories. Applying Buitelaar’s (2006) I-positions are powerful ways to explore intersectionality, tensions and contradictions which exist in how early years workers perform their different roles.

Our analysis highlights how attention to the co-production of the interview and emotional response of the researchers deepens and enriches our understanding. On one level this paper is about our three participants – Sally, Becky and Helen and the tensions they experience working in the early years sector. On a deeper level this paper is also about Sandra and Eva and how their analysis and interpretations are strongly linked to their own positionality and recognition that narratives can be interpreted in multiple ways. For Sandra her experience as a ‘non-mother’ shapes how she interprets narratives about motherhood and whether or not that makes you a better early years worker. For Eva her experience in the early years sector as a ‘migrant’ and lone mother shapes her understandings of gender, motherhood within the ECEC context. Through our reflexive analysis it is possible to understand the processes by which the normative approach to ECEC practices are identified and differentiated. We also demonstrated that employing a collaborative approach to the analysis of qualitative interviews where there is space for researchers to reflect together on their emotional engagement with narratives (in which we become another ‘character’ in the analysis) can provide a myriad of findings.

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