**The hidden impact of policy requirements on nursery workers in**

**England**

**Abstract**

There has been much international debate as to who can work with children. In England discussion have focussed on what kind of skills and qualifications nursery workers need. This is based largely on the nature of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policies that seek to ‘improve the quality of early years training’ (DfE, 2017a: 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’ (DfE, 2017a: 5). In England a worrying current trend, however, is that the levels of qualifications within the ECEC workforce are dropping (Bonetti, 2018). This paper investigates the ways in which government objectives of improving workforce quality can be achieved, and gives a critical perspective on data from twenty-six narrative interviews with ECEC workers. To explore how nursery workers interpret government policies, this paper focuses on two main government documents; The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017a) which became the statutory curricular framework in England from 2008; and The Early Years Workforce Strategy (EYWS) (DfE, 2017b) which details government visions of how to support the development of a well-qualified workforce with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to deliver high quality early education and childcare for young children. I argue that the ongoing and continuous amendments imposed by government present possible benefits for enhancing the professional recognition of the nursery worker. However, the fluid policy environment also gives rise to tensions and confusion in expectations of nursery workers’ professional practice. The concern is how national central government policies set out to influence outcomes for children at local level which in turn is related to the (un)intended ways in which nursery workers’ practice is shaped.

In terms of policy analysis, I draw on Foucault’s (2000) concept of ‘governmentality’ and Dean’s (2010) four dimensions of policy analysis through which the nursery worker can be situated in policy documents. Dean’s (2010) framework served as a starting point in which the four dimensions of governmentality are ‘fields of visibility, the technical aspect of government, forms of knowledge, and formation of identities’ (Dean, 2020: 41). Dean suggested that, for policy analysis, certain questions need to be asked such as ‘What forms of conduct are expected from them? What duties and rights do they have? How are these duties enforced and rights ensured? (p.43). To address these questions, I closely scrutinise the EYFS (DfE, 2017a) and the EYWS (DfE, 2017b) with the aim to find answers to Dean’s (2010) questions.

In terms of qualitative data analysis, I was drawing on Ramazanoğlu and Holland’s (2002) suggestion of the reality that is constructed in the gendered social relations. This is due to the gendered structure of the ECEC workforce. In order to contextualise the narratives the stories were put in dialogue with each other. By doing so, the ‘meaning making’ process in narrative inquiry can give a new dimension of life experiences of nursery workers. However, as Squire et al. (2014) suggested, narrative analysis is a complex process through which researchers analyse the multiple layers of the ‘told small stories’ focusing on “the participants’ self-generating meaning” (Cigdem et al., 2015: 204).

Once the themes were acknowledged from the narrative data, nursery workers interpretations were critically analysed. When data were indexed using codes, they were grouped into three main areas 1) Formal construction of the ‘good’ nursery worker – within policy documents, qualification, funding; 2) Who the worker is – gender, experienced worker, nursery workers who are also mothers; and 3) Emotional labour – unrecognised emotional labour, love, care, passion. By thematically grouping the small stories, the themes were analysed according to which stories were constructed by which participants. This approach allowed to pay additional attention to the ways in which meaning making was generated as well as addressing contradictions within the same narratives, and to acknowledge different levels of complex relationships to power (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008).

Findings highlight the that government policies are rarely directly transferred into practice. Instead, as Ball et al. (2011) argue, relevant actors, such as nursery managers, interpret, translate and sometime resist policy imperatives for endorsement. This debate contributes to the wider international policy discussions on worker qualifications which suggests that through ECEC, government incentives on improving outcomes for all children can be achieved.

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