Educating from the care perspective: exposing the tensions between maternalism and early education expectations in key person relationships

Abstract

This report summarises a hermeneutic phenomenological study concerned with understanding maternal values and how mothering experiences influence key person relationships in early years. It aimed to understand what role sociocultural environments and political agendas play within this. Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) and concepts of Noddings' (1984) ethics of care were applied to understand the associations between personal and professional identity. Six participants completed open-ended questionnaires in which the hermeneutic circle of interpretation (Heidegger 1962) was adopted with the support of word clouds. The adoption of Habermas' communicative theory (1984) was used to interpret participants' lifeworld. The findings of the study conclude that experiential knowledge and maternal values inform professional identity. Conflicts emerge when sociocultural environments contend to accommodate maternal values within wider professional roles as a result of political expectations.

Introduction

There is little research on how maternal values influence professional identity in key person relationships and so this study asked two key questions:

- Is there a conflict of personal and professional identity in relationships with young children and should it be more integrated?
- Does the key person approach continue to reflect its original purpose?

The enquiry was supported by the following research aims:

- Ascertain how the key person approach has been interpreted and adopted in early years settings
- Explore the elements of being a mother which influence professional identity
- Identify the values and beliefs that derive from motherhood
- Determine what difficulties impact upon key person relationships

To clarify, in the context of this study the personal identity is that of a mother and professional identity is that of a key person.

A small number of studies have conducted research which share similar aspects with regards to the focus of this study (Degotardi and Pearson 2009; Clark and Bayliss 2012; Lemos 2012; Page 2011; 2013; Lightfoot and Frost 2015) and methods used (Morris 2018) but differ in the specific area of early years practice.

Background

Political landscape

The early years sector has received unprecedented attention and change in the last decade, some of which was designed to eliminate the growing disparity between care and learning. The integration of maternal discourse and outcomes for children culminated in the Childcare Act (2006) rationalised provision, qualification and governance bringing a culture of professionalism prolonging the tension between care and learning (Clark and Bayliss 2012) by drawing attention to those who identify as being maternal opposed to those who are degree educated (Nutbrown and Page 2009). The debate between care and learning has escalated following numerous revisions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum and statutory framework (DSCF 2008b; DfE 2012, DfE 2014; DfE 2017) in which commissioned reviews of early years practice (Sylva et al. 2004; Tickell 2011; Nutbrown 2012) alongside rising expectations of what constitutes academic ability have influenced the identity of professionals.

A continual shift in curriculum expectations over the past decade places significant importance upon progress and performative measures as a consequence of the successive revisions of the education inspection framework (Ofsted 2019), early years statutory assessment (DfE 2020) and the introduction of baseline assessment (DfE 2019). These prescriptive practices appear to focus on cognitive construction of knowledge over characteristics of care which raises concern amongst academics within the sector (Pascal, Betram and Rouse 2019) that the pressure put on young children's competence will succumb to the detriment of their self-confidence and emotional well-being (DoH 2015), and consequently dilute the importance of the key person approach. The pressure held within schools undeniably disseminates into early years settings with demands placed upon them to prepare children to be school ready (Hughes et al. 2015).

Care related roles are often associated with low status because they are seen as 'woman's work' (Noddings 1984). Clark and Bayliss (2012) have attempted to identify why maternalism is undervalued within early years practice and draw on two factors which they describe as the cornerstones: maternal discourse (Ailwood 2008) and emotional connection (Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck 2003). This is further portrayed in images of motherhood which depict availability and emotional connectedness based on the premise that mother-child relationships are responsive, but as Dowling and Barnes (2001) state, there needs to be a wider awareness of the influence of social and cultural practices which reconstruct and negotiate the identity of such a role.

Relationships

The theoretical focus on relationships in the early years has been studied extensively with strengths drawn from the nature and consequences within home environments (Anders et al. 2011; Tickell 2011; Nicholson et al. 2016; DfE 2018a). The influential theory of attachment, founded by John Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980), has been the dominant framework used within this field to explore the bond between the primary caregiver, predominantly the mother figure, and the child. His findings situate early years pedagogy in a context that revolves around the attentive and sensitive interactions from adults where our first experiences of relationships satisfy our innate needs and desires within a reciprocal environment that is conducive to care and nurture.

Over the past decade most research into the key person approach has emphasised the use of attachment relationships (Clark and Bayliss 2012; Lemos 2012; Page 2013; Page and Elfer 2013) in forming connections past that of the mother figure. Recently, attention has turned to how care and nurturing attributes feature within these relationships (Cousins 2017; Page 2017; 2018a; 2018b; White and Gradovski 2018) and how these affect the identities of professionals who work in the sector (Roberts 2011; Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons 2014; Aslanian 2015; Barcroft 2016; Morris 2018).

However, the definition of the key person has changed (DSCF 2008b; DfE 2012, DfE 2014; DfE 2017) with key terms such as 'loving' and 'secure' in reference to the type of relationships adults should establish have been removed (DfE 2012; 2014). The

statutory framework (DfE 2017) states that "excessive one-to-one attention beyond the requirements of their usual role and responsibilities" (p.17) is unacceptable, yet it fails to expand on what it means by 'excessive' nor does it account for the role culture has on interpretation. The uncertain translation of theory and policy about intimacy into every day practice could therefore be at the detriment to the emotional needs of the children (Page 2018b), somewhat conflicting considering the foundations of the key person approach lie within attachment theory (Bowlby 1969).

Substitute Care

Communicative and reciprocal approaches to relationships with young children have been theorised with terms such as 'ethics of care' (Noddings 2012), mirroring the more established term 'in loco parentis' within early years practice. The position of care in early education has been widely studied (Moyles 2001; Bennett 2003; Manning-Morton 2006; Nutbrown and Page 2009) although little evidence has been drawn from the field of nursing and social sciences to contribute to the debate between caring 'for' and caring 'about' in education (Noddings 2013). It is only recently through the modern approach to professional love (Page 2011) that the focus has shifted back onto how professionals utilise their personal experience to facilitate better emotional and mental support for early years children within their relationships.

Noddings' theory of care (1984) illustrates the relational and intersubjective nature in which relationships form. She terms this as 'women's work' drawing on attachment-based practices to highlight the significance of the mother role, but poignantly outlines that this type of interaction contrasts with those involved in caring as a subject-object act. Misinterpretation of the role of a key person could therefore appear to offer relationships that satisfy the educational demands of the sector rather than seeing the role as being on the child's side (Manning, Morton and Thorpe 2003). The context of early education in the 1980's in which young children were handled by many staff members (Bain and Barnett 1980) further illustrates this danger in which the study concluded that children received little close, undivided attention from adults (Marshal 1982).

Methodology

Philosophical influence

Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected as it recognised contributory influences of experience, such as gender, culture and past, and allowed the researcher's personal assumption to feature. Heidegger (1977) conceptualised this theory as authentic reflection which allows for greater exploration beneath the subjective experiences in order to unveil the true meaning of the phenomenon to the world as encountered by individuals in their lifeworld stories, linking with the communicative theory proposed by Habermas (1984; 1987). This humanistic approach to social action illustrates what it feels like to be 'in their shoes' through the process of negotiated interpretations. The approach to data explication therefore exemplifies language and understanding as inseparable elements of being in the world (Laverty 2003).

Sampling and recruitment

The recruitment of participants was advertised on a flyer at three established network events and published on online communication platforms which professionals across the early years sector attend and access regularly.

Six voluntary participants, three from schools (two reception teachers and one nursery teacher) and three from private nurseries (managers) met the selection criteria:

- At least ten years' experience in early years
- Mother to their own child(ren)
- Key person to a group of children

The criteria were applied in order to effectively meet the research aims and safeguard the participants' ability to complete the questionnaire. Further contextual details were obtained: the name of the setting, their position, the number and ages of the children they worked with and their contact details.

Data collection and analysis

A non-traditional questionnaire consisting of five open ended questions (table 1) was sent to all following a pilot and receipt of signed consent. It was created as hermeneutics is concerned with what is said rather than how words are said. The questions carefully triangulated with the research aims and literature review to ensure

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there was a specific purpose and the language used was clear and relatable to the participants.

1. Can you tell me what your role as a key person looks like day-to-day?
2. From your experience, what do you think of the key person approach and why?
3. As a mother, what do you value most in the relationship(s) you have with your own child(ren) and why?
4. How do these values feature in your relationships with your key children?
5. How does being a mother impact on the way you build relationships with your key children?

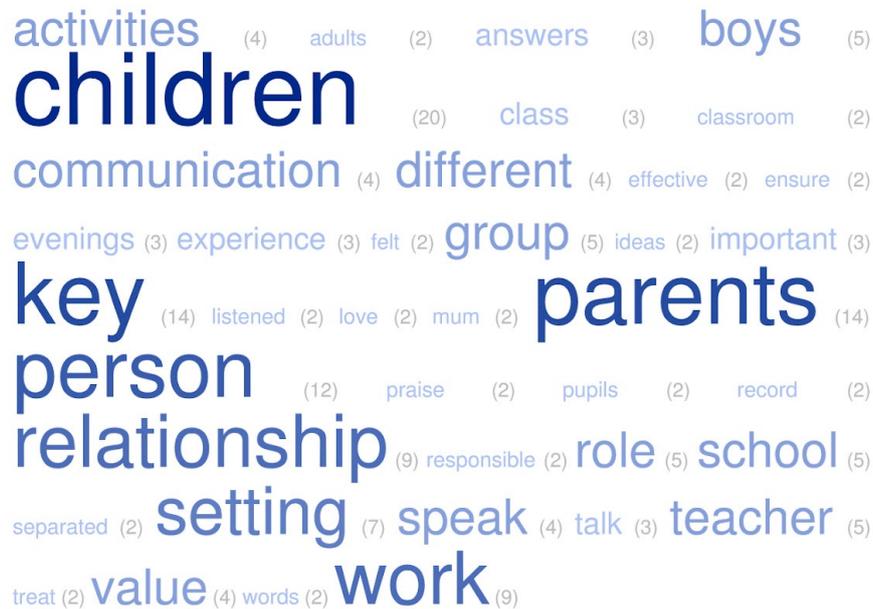Table 1. Questions asked to all participants

Participant responses were extracted and placed onto a blank page(s) to examine individual experiences as a whole as per the hermeneutic circle of interpretation (figure 1). An initial grasp of the meaning was documented in individual's explication journeys and a second read of each participant's response was conducted after a short period of distance from the research. Further questions were asked to participants over email to deepen the richness of the data collected (Gadamer 1977). Data saturation was reached after four months of reflective dialogue.
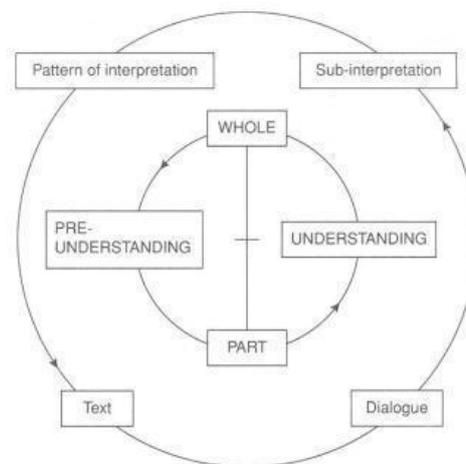
(Figure 1. The hermeneutic circle)

Word clouds (figure 2) elicited choices of language used by participants in order to see how their personal values feature within professional discussion. They acted as a supplement to the hermeneutic circle to support my personal reflection on the

individual responses contributing subtly to the summative explication of themes. Recurring themes and conflicts were then mapped across the group formulating the presentation of the findings within clusters of meanings.

activities (4) adults (2) answers (3) boys (5)
children (20) class (3) classroom (2)
communication (4) different (4) effective (2) ensure (2)
evenings (3) experience (3) felt (2) group (5) ideas (2) important (3)
key (14) listened (2) love (2) mum (2) parents (14)
person (12) praise (2) pupils (2) record (2)
relationship (9) responsible (2) role (5) school (5)
separated (2) setting (7) speak (4) talk (3) teacher (5)
treat (2) value (4) words (2) work (9)

(Figure 2. Word cloud example)

Memoing (Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014) captured my thoughts, feelings and experiences throughout the data collection process. Both descriptive and reflective notes were dated and documented to ensure a balance of reflexivity which purports the essence of reconstructing and reconceiving as outlined by Habermas (1981).

Ethics

Participants were not coerced in any way to take part and they were not approached at the events in which the flyer was distributed. Signed consent confirmed a gatekeeper was aware of their involvement in the study (Holloway 1997). The gatekeeper was either the head teacher or nursery owner. This promised a degree of confidentiality (Arksey & Knight 1999) for the participants as signing it showed there was mutual understanding that responses would not be communicated with the gatekeeper.

A participant information sheet outlined the protection of individual data (GDPR 2016) and in order to preserve anonymity, numerical pseudonyms were assigned upon receipt of responses. Data was saved electronically and a master copy detailing names assigned to the pseudonyms was securely stored on a password protected USB stick and backed up onto a secure university cloud-based system, only accessible by the researcher. All email communication was sent using a secure university email address.

Key findings

Interactions

Two participants indicated that they only meet with their key children in adult-initiated contexts. Participant one leads group discussions commenting "every morning, we sit together in a circle and talk about the question of the day, weekend news and anything else the children would like to talk about." Participant six's involvement appeared to only feature in formal teaching explaining that they "group our children by ability […] I currently consider my key children to be the children I work with in these groups".

Two responses reported a play-based approach to interactions with only participant two specifically detailing their role as working "directly with the children in play to further support them in their development". However, featured across all responses was that interactions with key children was geared towards observational purposes. Some stated that they work alongside their children in both play and adult-guided activities to identify next steps in learning and support any emerging needs (participants one and two), whilst others considered early identification as an outcome of monitoring development in partnership with other professionals (participants four and five).

Responsibilities

It appears that there is a difference in the level of responsibility within roles as participants one, three and six commented on their need to oversee the whole class as well as their key group of children. Participant three explained that having other staff members who take on the role of a key person "reduces the load".

Three out of six participants (school-based) raised assessment as a barrier to spending time with their key children due to their responsibilities of being class teachers. Participant one captured the impact of government expectations for children to achieve a good level of development on the level of interaction they offer stating "we are consistently pushing them to succeed in all areas of learning, and sometimes forgetting to spend time with them/sit and talk/share a book".

Those participants who work in private nurseries equally spoke of their wider professional role retracting their attention away from individual children:

> Being the manager alongside a key person means that I always have other responsibilities to carry out and courses to attend to ensure I fulfil all my responsibilities….there is always a phone call, a parent or a professional that also requires some of my time.
>
> (participant five)

Participant two explained the personal impact the limited capacity within their professional role has on their maternal identity:

> I feel that the role can become stressful...you feel that you juggle your time between those who need it the most at that time, rather than all children...I feel I value the time with my own children as I spend lots of time at work with other people's children, trying to give them the best start in life but spend less time with my own children.

Values

Five out of six responses expressed how important trust, honesty and the ability to talk openly was in supporting their own children's emotional well-being. Participant five captured the consensus that relationships with their children is based on experiences of "openness, realisation that nobody is perfect and we all make mistakes and how to overcome these and move forward".

Communication appeared to be the foundation of personal and professional relationships. Participant's one, three and five use it to model and teach morals, boundaries and rules seeing them as "the underpinning factors of a healthy relationships" and how this helps children "learn right from wrong". However, they all spoke of how they treat their key children as if they were their own, prioritising their safety and happiness, through developing empathy by drawing on their past

experiences as being a mother to allow them to be "sympathetic to the needs of the children" as they are "able to relate to the issue, problem or difficulty". Participant one and six further explain:

> ...that may mean giving some children extra time to talk, share, listen or even just a hug if they are feeling down. It's important that the children feel safe and valued and go home at the end of the day feeling happy and excited to come back the next day. That is what I expected for my own child, therefore I always ensure I give that to every one of my children at school.
>
> (participant one)

> I know the frustrations my own children have experienced at school and try where possible to learn from this. An example is praising the children who are always good and well behaved...both of my boys have at times felt overlooked as they get on in class. They have felt they weren't noticed. Being mindful of this I always try to comment and praise the always children. Acknowledging the small things is so important.
>
> (participant six)

Participant three echoes their childhood experiences as a key influencer in their approach to being emotionally available:

> With my own children and class I always make sure to listen and make them feel that what they are telling me is important - sometimes my children may waffle on (excuse the expression) and sometimes it is hard to show enthusiasm all of the time but I remember as a child speaking to my teacher about something I felt was so important and she brushed me off telling me to be quiet - I then never shared things with that adult again who then told my mum that she had concerns about my ability - that experience has stayed with me! I therefore never want my children or my class children to feel like that.

Discussion
Emotional connections
Participant's experience of emotional availability as a mother was a value they all hoped to employ when engaging with key children, corroborating with the natural and innate attributes of mothers (Ailwood 2008). One explanation of this finding could be that participants refer to their own emotional experiences of specific situations. Maria Robinson (2003) suggests that the identity of a key person is interpreted in the way they "recognise themselves for who they are, what they believe and why" (p.171). Our past experiences remind us of times when we were mothered and the reliance on them

to support us, therefore this shared reality is what grounds the key person approach, either consciously or subconsciously, where adults are able to recognise the feelings and needs of children who are experiencing similar situations. This finding complements Page (2013) who showed mothers who place children in childcare want practitioners who are loving and caring towards their children encompassing a degree of emotional connectedness and availability.

Dalli's (1999) contention that mothers are mothers all of the time echoes the responses which portray key children as if they were participants' own. Lightfoot and Frost (2015) promote personal and professional identity as inseparable as it encompasses antecedent and contributory factors which define who we are rather than what role we play. It is therefore considered a work in progress (Erikson 1975). This is reflected in how participants categorised the emotional support they offer key children into feelings of empathy and modelling what they believe to be acceptable morals and behaviours, mirroring their personal experiences with their own children.

Previous research has found that children need adults to help them make sense of emotions and know how to express and respond appropriately to these (Sylva et al. 2004). It could therefore be suggested that participants are more attuned to the emotional needs of key children due to their ability to revert back to memories of their own children in similar situations and the emotions connected to them, thus supporting the healthy development of children's well-being (Early Education 2011). Although this presumes participant's mother-child relationships are emotionally secure and conducive to care. This is representative of the lifeworld concept where participants reflect and adapt their behaviours and values in response to emotive situations (Holyroyd 2007) therefore allowing their ontological beliefs to be reconstructed which is similar to my experience of becoming a mother; my perception of relationships with key children has been influenced by my own experience of motherhood.

Participants remind us of the power within bidirectional relationships in which objective essences are exercised. Shared values of empathy, tolerance and patience are clearly marked as foundations to supporting children's well-being in which both the mother and key person identities of participants want children to feel content and happy. However, the subjective nature of these relationships is questionable as there appears to be a distinct shift in both societal views and discourse regarding school readiness

and the value of nursery education (Bruce 2015). This impacts on how both the mother and key person understand and interpret their role within relationships with children and again highlights the cross-sector conflict of care and learning. The increasing demand on cognitive ability promoted within media and political agendas could argue that the success of key person relationships lies within the set of skills or the knowledge children amass, not perhaps how personal qualities or traits are developed.

Communication

The purpose of communication within key person relationships appeared to differ across participants and particularly across sectors. David et al. (2003) argued that a key person needs to have a genuine interest in being in their children's company, a commonality that all participants appeared to share, although some were more explicit than others. The Study of Early Education and Development (Callanan et al. 2017) reported the impact high quality one-to-one interactions have on children's personal, social and emotional development, finding the most effective professionals to view "their role as broader than supporting cognitive development and placing equal emphasis on the aim of fostering happy, confident and sociable children" (p.35). It is clearly evident that participants draw on their maternal values to support emotional well-being, but conflicts emerge when political demands contend with these, therefore it could be argued that there is an imbalance between the focus on cognitive ability and emotional competence within their key person role.

This can be explored further in that children's interactions with their key person in private nurseries appear to largely focus around play with a degree of autonomy for children to lead and influence its direction, yet this was considerably different to what those in school-based settings reported. Administrative tasks, such as observation and assessment, appeared to dictate what and how a key person in a school engages with their children. The omission of the word 'play' from their responses emphasises this difference, as they saw it as their time to 'work' with children, suggesting a product-orientated approach to interactions to evidence educational expectations. However, these generalisations are comparisons within a small sample size.

One explanation as outlined in Gleave and Cole-Hamilton's (2012) study concludes that play in the context of early education has been sidelined to prioritise cognitive

based activities. The increase in structured, directed activities could be depriving children of their basic right to play reframing it as an "unaffordable luxury" (Elkind 2008). It is, however, difficult to explain this result as there are numerous factors outside of this study's remit which may have influenced participants' responses, such as the effectiveness of their qualification training, the demographic context of their setting and the setting's culture.

Time

All participants acknowledged the importance of spending quality time with children to ensure that they are safe, stimulated and interested within their environment encompassing the necessary conditions for learning as outlined within the Code of Ethics (Early Education 2011). However, tensions emerge when the balance between care and learning struggle to find equilibrium, often resulting in approaches that do not encompass the holistic needs of children.

One explanation may be how participants interpret their professional role as there appeared to be a compelling argument suggesting complex relationships reduce the amount of time spent with key children. Time liaising with other professionals and the associated administration appeared to affect the way in which participants viewed this aspect of their role. Most participants battled with the idea that this removed them from their key children without an acknowledgment that this triangulation across services supports children's emotional and cognitive development (Paylor, Georgeson and Wong 2016). It could be assumed that the culture of the setting determines the appropriate use of time, perhaps explaining why some participants appear to spend more time observing children which would naturally equate to more time completing administrative tasks.

There are, however, similarities in attitudes expressed in this study with those described in Roberts-Holmes' (2013) findings in which he discovered the impact assessment reforms have upon teacher pedagogy and consequently the amount of time to fulfil the key person role. The rigour and scrutiny exercised by Ofsted has impacted on how leadership in settings impose professionals in early years to use data to inform their practice in which they "cynically comply" (Bradbury 2013, p.124). This is coupled with the government expectations exercised within the EYFS of which the

impact of performative discourses leads to less time for participants to engage in genuine conversations or interaction (David et al. 2003). This may reflect the climate in which participant's work, suggesting emotional safety and happiness of their key children is being overshadowed by learning and progress, which completely opposes the assumed values held within participants' maternal identities and principles underpinning the key person approach.

Time appears to affect the interplay between personal and professional identity and often creates situations in which participants feel unable to exercise their values in practice (Anning, Cullen and Fleer 2009). Participants have alluded to the feeling of guilt in which they feel compelled to care about key children, yet they also feel obliged to honour their responsibilities held within their wider professional role.

Summary

The findings of this study conclude that there is a clear conflict of identity between the key person and the mother for the vast majority of participants, specifically tensions between maternal values and early education expectations. Professional identities have adapted and evolved in response to the successive revisions of political discourse resulting in young children to be school ready, suppressing maternal instincts.

Two inter-related and significant disputes worth highlighting are that the role of a key person has been mistakenly adopted within wider professional roles which subsequently has resulted in the key person approach to be subject to administrative formalities. This concludes that the approach has somewhat become confused and underappreciated.

In a wider context, this study has found that mothers continue to love, care and nurture children, grounding their identities as attachment figures based on their intrinsic and natural instinct to support children's emotional well-being. Young children continue to display attachment-based behaviours in which they rely on adults to sensitively and attentively respond, shaping children's internal working models. It could therefore be argued that participants will continue to search for equilibrium between their personal and professional identities should the context in which early education continue to

suppress young children's basic and fundamental need to be cared 'about', rather than the culture which appears to direct a profession to care 'for' children.

To conclude, I propose future research further examines maternal identity within the role of a key person to encourage more professionals to educate from the care perspective.

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