YOUTH PRACTITIONER PROFESSIONAL NARRATIVES: CHANGING IDENTITIES IN CHANGING TIMES

by MARK PRICE, *University of Brighton*

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines youth practitioner professionality responses to neo-liberal policy changes in youth work and the youth support sector in the UK, from New Labour to Conservative led administrations. Using a narrative inquiry approach, six early career practitioners, explore and recount their experiences of moving into the field during changing political times. The narratives reveal differentiated responses to a climate of increasing managerialism and performativity but point to the value of narrative capital as a personalised resource.*

Key words: youth practitioner identities; professionality; narrative capital

Mark Price is Principal Lecturer in the Education Research Centre, School of Education, University of Brighton.

Education Research Centre
School of Education
Checkland Building
University of Brighton
Falmer
Brighton
BN1 9PH
Email: m.price@brighton.ac.uk
Tel: 01273 643319

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines individual youth practitioner responses to becoming and practising as a professional, during a time of significant social, political and economic change. These personalised emerging *professionalities* (Evans, 2008) illustrate differing strategies to working in a climate of neoliberal performativity – initially through a period of social reform and professionalisation under the UK's New Labour government (1997 to 2010), and then through a period of so called 'austerity' and far reaching cuts to public services, under Conservative-led administrations (2010 to present). The fate of youth services and of the youth practitioners whose narratives are examined in this paper, reflect this context and process of new/re-professionalism and subsequent de-professionalism. Each of the practitioners considered in this paper entered a period of professional training and qualification at

a UK higher education (HE) institution, between 2005 and 2009, with subsequent navigation through post-qualifying practice in the field, from 2009 onwards.

This increasingly hostile and confusing landscape of re-positioning professionalism within education, health and welfare services (particularly that of teaching and nursing (Sugrue and Solbrekke, 2011)), is further contextualised by a rise in targeting and testing within education and related public service domains (Sahlberg, 2012), and an associated focus on performativity (Ball, 2008), all at the expense of critical professionality and agency. The stories told by the youth practitioners explored in this paper, in many ways reflect the experience of practitioners in related education, health and social care public service communities, including those in what might previously have been regarded as more established professions (e.g. teaching and social work).

2. YOUTH POLICY AND PRACTICE

The period examined within this paper was heralded initially by the introduction of *Connexions* (DfEE, 2000). This service framework, introduced by the New Labour government to provide information, advice and guidance, including provision of intensive support, for young people at risk of becoming or already having become 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET), was followed by further policy which increasingly focused on 'targeted youth support' (DfES, 2007). These developments presented a 're-professionalising' of youth services and youth practitioners, and were regarded with suspicion and criticism by many in the field (e.g. Smith, 2007), reflecting concerns over an increasing 'problematisation' of young people within policy agendas. A significant impact of these developments though was to undermine professional autonomy and hence destabilise the existing youth work professional field more broadly.

Following the New Labour professionalisation and modernisation agenda, since 2010 the Conservative-led government strategy of asserting 'austerity' cuts to public service finances, has had an immediate, detrimental impact on youth services and youth practices generally. This is evidenced by a survey of local authority children and young people's services (Higgs, 2011) which identified that of those responding, 56% of youth services and 40% of Connexions services were amongst provision most vulnerable to public sector spending cuts, whilst the Commons Select Committee Report (June 2011) into services for young people commented that 'The low priority afforded to continuing professional development of the youth workforce is concerning' (House of Commons, 2011).

Three years later, Unison (2014) reported that between 2012 and 2014, cuts in funding to youth services in the UK totalled at least £60 million, resulting in the loss of over 2000 jobs across the sector. More recently still, the latest comprehensive study of local authority spending in the UK (Unison, 2016) identified a reduction of

£387m from April 2010 to April 2016, with 3652 youth work jobs lost in the last four years of this period of reporting. Cuts to public services generally and to youth services specifically continue, with new budget reductions and associated service and centre closures reported regularly (NYA, 2017).

The voices of youth workers, just prior to the period of change considered in this paper, are well presented in a study by Spence, Devanney and Noonan (2006). In examining cross-cutting themes of policy and practice, Spence et al evidence both the dispersed nature of youth work practices and the confusion experienced 'between bureaucracy, accountability and methods of evaluation' (ibid, p.136). This shifting and inconsistent nature of policy development impacts directly on youth service strategy and by inference, on youth practitioner professionalism. Davies (2010; 2014), documents this, highlighting particularly contradictions in the expectations and requirements which seek to govern practice. Bradford and Cullen (2014, p.3) concur, asserting that youth policy developed particularly under recent, so called 'austerity' approaches to public service funding, is 'highly dispersed and enacted through a range of agents, sites and institutions'. Contradictions embedded within governmental youth policy are also examined by Mason (2015), who concludes that an 'epistemic disjuncture' (p.70) exists between policy makers and practitioners.

Throughout this period, routes to national, professional recognition for youth services practitioners have continued to include HE programmes validated by the National Youth Agency's (NYA) Education Training Standards Committee (ETS). Such routes confer professional status within the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) for Youth and Community Workers framework (NYA, 2014). In addition, and in keeping with New Labour's reformation of public services, HE institutions and employers were also encouraged to adopt a 'youth professional status' recognition award framework, endorsed by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2009). Acting on behalf of the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the CWDC's *Young People's Workforce Reform Programme* (ibid) focused particularly on practitioners working in a range of roles in services for young people and Connexions-related learning, development and youth support services. This re-professionalising agenda paralleled the broader, dispersed policy framework. For some practitioners, in navigating their practice and their developing professionality through such policy terrain, their sense of displacement remains palpable. For others, their professional fortitude is evident within a pragmatic endurance of a lack of personal-professional congruence. It is the responses of such practitioners which this paper considers.

3. PROFESSIONALISM AND PROFESSIONALITY

The rise of professionalism in the 20th century runs alongside the development of the welfare state. Perkin (2002) documents this process authoritatively, positioning the rise of professionalism in relation to a former class system, particularly in the field of public services. Sociological models of professional trait or typology (e.g. Millerson, 1964; Friedson, 1986; Sims, Fineman and Gabriel, 1993) emphasise key defining characteristics or features of professions, including for example, a skill set based on theoretical knowledge; specified education and training (including examination of professional competence); and adherence to a specified code of conduct. Inherent within this, and protected through a relevant, independent, professional regulatory body, is the notion of professional *autonomy* that extends beyond expertise, knowledge and skill into *agency* (Ord, 2014), with accountability centred upon membership of the professional body, underpinned by support from the wider society.

Such models are reflected in professionalisation agendas within education and welfare services, particularly during the latter part of 20th century. Occupations themselves have sought professionalisation and the associated status this affords, whilst government has sought to regulate the public recognition and control of such developing professions. In more recent times though, professional regulatory bodies, in the form of independent 'national councils' (the *General Teaching Council for England* and the *Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work,* for example) which legitimised ethical practice and status, have since been replaced by organisations which lack professional independence, being situated instead within central government departments.

The professionalisation 'project' which emerged in the early part of the new millennium, included the attempted re-professionalisation of youth work and related youth practices. Svensson (2006, p.580) suggests that the professionalisation agenda has sought to 'invoke trust and confidence in new forms of work organization'. However, Morrell (2007, p.26) sees this 'semantic and practice-theoretic account' of professionalism, as emphasising 'the complexity of interaction in the occupational, organizational and social contexts for professional work' (ibid). Morrell points to the possibility of new models of professionalism emerging, as knowledge, organisation and power change, socially and structurally. Evidence of this was present during the New Labour administrations, as functions of service, engagement and intervention became hybridised, often cutting across the traditional demarcation of education, health and social care provision. The emergence at the time of concepts of *new-professionalism*, *para-professionalism* and the *associate professional* (Edmond and Price, 2009), was exemplified by that of the Connexions Personal Adviser.

For many practitioners working in this 'post-professional' (Hargreaves, 2000) age of public services, the pace of policy change and accompanying structural and professional re-formation has been an unsettling and disorientating process. The practitioners presented in this paper have encountered a 'fractured and contested

terrain' (Sugrue and Solbrekke, 2011, p.3), whilst their identities are by necessity, 'characterised by flux, with stability being more elusive while openness to change is a more definite requirement' (2011, p.ix).

An added demand on youth practitioner professionality relates to the often interdisciplinary nature of their practice, working alongside others with different professional identities and foci. Brooks and Thistlethwaite (2012) draw attention to the potential conflict this creates for professional identities and which can challenge accepted and established practices and professionalism.

In response to such policy-practice landscapes, Marsico (2012) suggests that professionals should be encouraged to embrace semi-permeable trajectories of identity in order that they can play a 'key mediation and modulation role in the processes of change' (2012, p.127). The implication here is that not only do professionals need to develop the resources to embrace such trajectories, but by doing so, they become agents of the change process themselves. The narratives of youth practitioners considered here both reflect such trajectories of identity and provide 'capital' (Goodson, 2013) which potentially affords agency and change.

4. THE ENQUIRY PROCESS AND METHODS

In relation to narrative constructions of professionality, Power (2008, p.144) argues for the development of professional imagination and points towards consideration of 'the relational, temporal and dispositional attributes of our profession and our careers' in developing professional narrative. Voice is key here, particularly as a counter to western neo-liberalism, in that it 'values all human beings' ability to give an account of themselves' (Couldry, 2010, p.13). In the context of such western neo-liberalism, Goodson (2013, p.7) considers narrativity to offer 'a 'mediating membrane' or 'point of refraction' between external structure and personal agency'. Through exploring different styles or forms of narrativity, Goodson emphasises the importance of re-selfing, suggesting that a 'capacity to theorize and locate our life story may provide a highly developed resource for responding to life events' (2013, p.118).

Hence, the study adopts an interpretivist/constructivist stance, focusing on 'the meaning making activity of the individual mind (Crotty, 2003, p.58). It is acknowledged that it is clearly not possible to generalise from the individual narratives towards a broader, collective or theorised view of youth practitioner professionality. However, what is presented is an analysis which evidences the value of individualised, professional, *narrative capital* (Goodson, 2013), which offers associated affordances to youth practitioners to respond to the challenges of the current service and policy landscape in the UK and beyond.

Youth practitioners were asked to present their own story, through open, loosely structured interviews (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). The interviews explore processes of 'border' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and 'boundary' (Kerosuo and Engeström, 2003) crossing. These include the processes and actions of becoming professional – moving from non-professionally defined roles, in domestic, recreational and in some cases educational contexts, and managing tensions and conflicts within, at times, competing personal roles and identities.

Using a purposive sampling approach, practitioners who had previously successfully completed a professionally recognised, HE-led, work-based learning award between 2005 and 2009, were invited to participate. Those selected were chosen to reflect a range of experiences and identities of practitioners, who at the time of initial interviewing, were employed in roles for which professional recognition was a requirement. The six practitioners (all names have been changed) who participated in the study were:

Jackie – now re-training as a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist. She previously trained as nurse and was later employed as a Connexions Personal Adviser, working within a further education college setting.

Caitlin – employed as a practice manager in a local authority children's services department. Previously she had worked as youth worker in the same authority and before that was in banking.

Mia – after leaving school she worked in retail for several years before moving into working with young people, initially as a Teaching Assistant and then through a number of learning and youth support roles, including that of Connexions Personal Adviser. She has since decided to undergo further professional training in order to qualify as a mental health nurse.

Robert – worked in the National Health Service (NHS) before being employed as a Connexions Intensive Personal Adviser for a local authority youth service. He was recently made redundant as a result of cuts to youth services. Previously, he managed a bookshop.

Kathy – co-director of an independent community arts project for people with learning disabilities. Previously she led a programme for people with learning disabilities at a further education college and prior to this she worked as an holistic health practitioner, using massage, reflexology and Reiki.

Chloe – came into working with young people through pastoral support work in schools, before securing a post as local authority Connexions Intensive Personal Adviser, a role which has subsequently been refocused within a targeted youth support service.

The approach taken during the interviews was a collaborative one, working with the respondents to explore the incidence, influence and contribution of specific relationships, events and encounters within their respective professional formation processes, as well as broader reflective analysis of developing trajectories and identities. Hence, the study is based on a series of in-depth collaborative inquiries into co-constructed, professional selfhood. Data *collection* (practitioners reflecting on their experience) and data *analysis* (further collaborative analysis of the narrative), at times interweave within the dialogical relationship between each practitioner and myself as the researcher. Within the enquiry process, there is a movement between the personal and the social, between what happened previously and what was felt or identified at the point of the interviews, a space within which there is an ebb and flow between reflection, analysis and synthesis. Such reflexive and liminal spaces, which the interviewer co-habits with the interviewees as collaborative researchers, are regarded by Speedy (2008, p.28) as 'highly political, personal, imaginative and social spaces'.

Participants were interviewed twice. The first scoping interview was based broadly on *'Tell me your story. How did you come to be working within young people's services? What is it that makes you who you are, 'professionally'?'* Interviews lasted for approximately 80 – 90 minutes. My questioning, reflection and clarification, responded directly to the focus and direction of each participant's presenting narrative.

I was not a 'neutral' interviewer. Interpretations and analyses were developed and explored collaboratively, usually in the sense of considering and negotiating connections between narrative threads. My own background as a teacher, youth worker, psychotherapist and university tutor, informed the approach taken as a researcher here. Hence, a *co-construction* process (see for example, Clandinin, 2007) was utilised. The narratives upon which this paper is based are likely to have evolved differently, with a different researcher. All those interviewed knew me from their previous HE study, and levels of trust and openness were acknowledged as underpinning the dialogical relationship.

Following the first interview, the transcribed text was sent to the participant who was asked to reflect further on themes discussed and consider starting points for the second interview. In particular, participants were asked to consider both how their practice, identity and professionality had developed in recent times, with thoughts for their future development. This then provided the foci for a second interview, following which, the process of transcription and collaborative reflection and analysis was repeated.

Finally, narrative portrayals for each practitioner were constructed, again through a negotiated, dialogical process, drawing on the two interview transcripts

and subsequent email exchanges, as primary data. The portrayals developed were structured temporally, from 'looking back' to 'looking forward', with professionality as a central driving theme.

This article does not present the practitioner portrayals in full, but rather focuses specifically on the practitioners' narrative responses to being 'in practice', particularly over the more recent period of ever-increasing public service managerialism and performativity, and of their individual potential and/or future professionality. The intention is to illustrate and offer analysis of personalised responses to the corrosiveness of neoliberal rationality.

5. PROFESSIONALITY AND PRACTICE

The participants' sense of professional selfhood – of feeling professional – is a moral one. The recognition of *praxis* (see Smith, 2011) and a commitment to social justice can be regarded as a shared 'value-base' for youth practitioners. This centres on issues of agency and ethical practice and hence requires a level of professionality, fostered through a process of engaging what Barnett (1997, p.12) refers to as 'critical interrogation of practice', the purpose of which is 'to critique action so as to produce more enlightened forms of action' (ibid). This process demands a furthering of the process of becoming authentic or consciously competent, through development of a critically reflective narrative.

The sense of commitment to professional ethics and values and personal, moral integrity within both practice and professionality, is emphasised by Jackie:

> *I think there are formal professional values and codes of behaviour which can be taught and have contributed to my professional identity but these have been brought to life or enhanced by my own personal values and the values developed through doing the job over time and by having good role models. It's difficult to separate these as much of it is an inter-related organic process*

Robert concurs:

> *I think one of the things that is quite interesting [is that] it's evolved that way. We're doing the same job, we're doing it in such different ways; we bring ourselves, our personal selves into that, so that's what was brilliant about it. You got all the skills but you were doing it through you, you're not aware of negotiating; you're using a lot of wisdom*

Jackie's and Robert's identification personal-professional ethical integrity at the heart of youth practitioner professionality, reflects the long regarded centrality of

altruism within professionalism more widely (Millerson, 1964). Later, Robert continues with this theme, placing young person-centredness at the core of his praxis:

> *It's a crude way of putting it, but we are essentially looking at the emotional geography of […] young people. We're looking at their needs and we're feeding that in a way with a kind of practice, an informed practice, which is … young person-centred*

Caitlin is also clear about the centrality of young people within practice when she observes:

> *It's about where they're at – let's start there and then maybe be able to work on things, whatever they want to work on. So it's about young people having a real stake in the work.*

This commitment to young people and being young person-centred features in the narratives of all six interviewed and echoes for many the drive to enter the work in the first place. Kathy's commitment to empowerment and social justice *('the desire to ensure my learners […] have a positive experience of education and there is real recognition of their achievements')* exemplifies this.

As their narratives develop through early accounts of entering the work and undertaking professional training and development, the practitioners focus increasingly on their experience of how professionals are required to re-invent themselves as 'units of resource' (Shore and Wright, 1999, p.559) which is experienced often as a direct challenge to altruistic professionality. Robert views his managers pejoratively as *'a bunch of bean counters'*, continuing to suggest that the process of professional accountability has been reduced to:

> *a quantifiable thing – it's just about quantities [...] and the service and the quality and the whole possibilities of exploring different ways you know – engagement, practice, deliberate things – disappears and it all becomes a paperwork exercise*

Robert's narrative here reflects a defensive and resistant strategy. He is both angry at the erosion of services but at the same time protective of his own professionality:

> *So what's getting lost is that 'oh you've got to have twelve interventions and then move on. You've gotta close this case because we've got lots of other cases; we wanna have a turnover of so many clients a year'. It's f**king b**locks – we're serving the service*

Robert's frustration is a direct product of the climate of managerial performativity (Ball, 2001), which has become increasingly evident in public services. Ball's (2012, p.29) suggestion that a product of performativity is that 'we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time reporting on what we do rather than doing it' reflects Robert's experience and the way that this is embedded in a narrative of resolve and resilience.

Kathy is similarly critical of her managers:

we have a new head of department and [...] we are being really micro-managed at the moment and that's very frustrating [...] it's quite undermining if you're having everything put under a microscope [...] and if suddenly a lot of your time is taken up with having to explain things or evidence other things

However, Kathy positions her resistance to this in terms of adopting a strategy of withdrawal and reclamation of identity on her own terms. Initially, she was invited to apply for a newly created management post, partly as a result of completing her degree at university and gaining wider recognition:

A job came up at work - a learning development manager [...] and so I'd had a couple of calls saying 'you'll be applying' because I'd finished the degree. And I thought, 'yeah I should apply for that then, I should apply for the management post because that's the next step for me'. And it just filled me with horror and I spent three days really anxious about it, couldn't sleep, worrying about it

This represented a turning point for Kathy who subsequently resigned from her post working in the learning disabilities team and set up her own independent organisation (see de St Croix, 2015). In this context, Kathy was able to continue to work in the same broad field but on her own terms, and in an environment where she could maintain her personal-professional ethical integrity. At this point Kathy's narrative reflects her sense of liberation and transformation: *'once I actually made the decision that I wasn't going to apply for [the management position], it was an enormous relief. It was like "I can just do what I feel like"'*.

Chloe echoes Robert and Kathy, when she clearly feels the pressure of the current working climate:

all the little worker ants you know, doing what they need to do in order to hit those targets – and people will just burn out, people will just flake out and they won't be delivering the service that they want to deliver and the service that young people coming to us deserve

But despite this, Chloe's commitment to her work-role is unwavering:

It does sound like I've been moaning about my job but I do love my job. I think that's why we all stick with it because ultimately we all love our job. I hate all the red tape nonsense and the bureaucracy that goes with it but my work with young people – I love it. I get real satisfaction from that and ultimately that's what matters

Hence, each practitioner articulates their altruistic commitment to young people as a core strand to a personal-professional ethic. What differs however, are individual practitioner responses to neoliberal policy and associated management practices.

6. RESPONSES, POSITIONS AND DECISIONS

What emerges then are narratives as *refractions* (Goodson and Rudd, 2012) – recounted reflections and recollections through each individual participant's personal and professional prismatic lens. The emerging narratives reflect three broad strategies adopted in response to the emphasis on performativity in the changing professional and political landscape, the strategies being *'get real'*, *'get promoted'* and *'get out'*.

Robert's narrative reflects a response which can be summarised as '*get real'*, where practitioners batten down the hatches and steel themselves to the storms of neo-liberalism, whilst hanging on to the sense of purpose (and reward) they felt they had when they originally came into the work. Chloe's narrative also reflects this position as both she and Robert continue to work in roles they were in whilst studying on the HE programme.

In contrast, Kathy's response, along with that of Jackie and perhaps to a lesser extent Mia, is one of '*get out'*, with all three moving on to new roles and different but related professional identities. For these practitioners, their professional commitment to altruistic service, present from the outset but fostered through their professional formation and development, becomes repositioned within their respective changing or developing professional narratives. Such a response becomes a motivating factor in enabling the practitioner to maintaining personal-professional ethical professionality.

Caitlin's response is different again and her narrative is one that presents a third position (and one which Kathy also considers), that of *get promoted*, where practitioners leave the 'front line' and become managers. Here, the drive is perhaps to enabling others to continue in practice. Caitlin demonstrates her commitment to values informed practice when she asserts: *'anybody that I interact with in work,*

whoever that may be, I think it's really important to know where they are coming from and why they're there and what motivates them', although when pressed on her own specific professional identity she reflects *'I'm not quite sure what I am anymore'.*

In each case, the practitioner recounts experiences of responding to recent and current challenges in their work and asserts a narrative anchor point to the immediate future. Here, their narratives are current in terms of their present professional role and function but more importantly they assert and reflect the sense of narrative capital (Goodson, 2013) accrued and developed over time. This capital enables to the practitioner to continue to practice in the 'here and now' but also affords a sense of fortitude in response to as yet to be encountered future challenges.

7. FUTURE PROFESSIONALITY

The initial threads of the professional formation and development process are woven into the practitioner's narrative, as a process of personal-professional alignment. As careers and professional roles develop and personal circumstances change, so the practitioner's narrative explores shifts and tensions created through competing pressures, discourses and identities.

Mia describes the process of developing identities and associated skills and perspectives as her career shifts and unfolds, as *'layering up'.* Not long after starting the interview process, Mia revealed that she was contemplating leaving young people's services and re-training as a mental health nurse: *'I can see a pattern of doing this, changing, doing this, changing. I don't think that's a bad thing; I think that's how we continue to learn'.* Mia describes how she has *'been looking at other jobs but they all seem to be side steps and to less salary, which I don't really want - I want a challenge',* observing she *'never saw myself as being someone who'd be in the same job for forty years'.* Part of a practitioner's narrative then, particularly those who see their roles and/or identities as evolving or shifting, relates to the extent to which they are able to carry forward or build on elements of one identity or role into the next. In such circumstances, their unfolding professional life story becomes a vehicle for managing and incorporating the change process into a broader professional narrative.

This evolving narrative inevitably is more obvious in practitioners whose career changes have become contextualised into a coherent life story – a kind of internalised personal-professional congruence and which comes to diffuse and dispel any lingering dissonance. Jackie's story exemplifies this. Her early professional identity was as a nurse. From there she undertook some training in counselling skills before gaining employment as a Connexions Personal Adviser. After widespread cuts to Connexions, locally and nationally, Jackie is now re-training as a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist. In her first interview, she recounts how what

she identifies as her 'nurse identity' has evolved, but still forms a significant part of who she is:

> *I love my nurse! I think there were times when I didn't like it. I think my identity as a nurse is something that […] I've wrestled with a lot but now I feel I've integrated her. She is a part of me and she is a part of me as a psychotherapist and I think she is a part of me – if I went back to youth work, she is a part of that.*

More broadly, Jackie is astute in observing:

> *I do think we are all in a state of becoming. I do think that. I've arrived so many times in my life I don't think I'm just not going to do it anymore because I just think there are platforms and you move on […] what I think is beginning to happen is that I'm beginning to not care so maybe I'm near to arriving!*

For some, the practical elements or everyday behaviours associated with professional selfhood become misaligned with other personal identities and core values. The narrator begins to feel that the role and identity is no longer theirs. This appears to be the case for both Mia and Caitlin. working respectively in retail and in banking prior to moving into youth services.

Robert's and Chloe's narratives evidence the tension they experience in the way that previously valued professionality has now been diminished. In such circumstances it is perhaps unsurprising that the narrator can feel frustrated and disempowered in relation to restrictions on professional agency and autonomy. This frustration can provide the impetus for a shift in perspective or paradigm (Mezirow, 1991), and act as a motivation for change and transformation. Unfortunately though, examination of professional selfhood or identity is unlikely to be fostered by employers in a culture of performativity and control and in such circumstances, the narrator is forced to accommodate this lack of alignment into their narrative, potentially at personal, psychological cost.

In contrast, Kathy talks of her *'new home'*, her self-formed independent organisation, which creates a context and opportunity for personal-professional transformation. Her narrative becomes expansive. She literally re-creates the future in its telling. In recounting her experience of choosing not to apply for the manager's post (rejecting the *get promoted* strategy) and then of her refocused intensity and her chosen new trajectory, Kathy's narrative evidences a new, vitalising energy, reflecting perhaps the process of 'transformative' (Mezirow, 1991) professional learning.

Less dramatic perhaps, but equally personally significant, are the new professional 'homes' and identities Jackie and Mia move to and adopt. Here, there is potentially some space for doubt or even regret. However, through the process of change, Mia's narrative reflects the potential for transformation and associated release of emotional energy:

> *The week before I left work, because of finances and things, I had to work right up until the last moment so I left work on the Friday and started the new degree on the Monday – there was no kind of breathing space. That last week at work my constant thought was, 'this was such a good idea at the time' and 'shit! - what am I doing?!' So yeah, it was really scary. But now I'm here and I started [the new course], I'm really excited by it again.*

At the conclusion of the study, three of the practitioners (Kathy, Mia and Jackie) had 'changed tack', creating new futures for themselves in roles which are related to, but move beyond their former professional identities, with their associated youth services 'footprint' (CWDC, 2009). In these contexts the narratives encompass a new, created futures. Of the remaining three, the Caitlin's narrative encompasses a career progression into management, leaving at the conclusion of the interviews, only Robert and Chloe as 'frontline' youth services practitioners – for both, their narratives are defined to some extent by their resolution to maintain professionality in the face of performativity. [Note: more recent contact with Robert has revealed that he has subsequently been made redundant as part of continued cuts to local authority children and young people's services.]

8. CONCLUSIONS

The narratives of the practitioners considered here are striking in their terms of their individuality. Their highly personalised stories do not reflect identification with an homogenised field of professional practice and self-regulation, associated with more traditional trait or typology models (Millerson, 1964; Sims et al, 1993). However, they do share a strikingly principled and ethical commitment to their work with young people, reflecting Reid and Oliver's (2014, p.44) emphasis on the relationship between 'professional status and ethical watchfulness'.

The experience of these practitioners is that employers' support for, and promotion of, the professional legitimacy and trust which Svensson (2006) regards as a feature of the new-professionalism, has not been consistent. The practitioners here have been required to work in a state of fracture and flux (Sugrue and Solbrekke, 2011), and their individual responses vary, reflecting in differing degrees *'get real'*, *'get promoted'* and/or *'get out'* strategies.

Confused role focus, increased workloads and a reduced commitment to professional autonomy, maintaining professional recognition and continuing professional development, have all taken their toll on individual and collective professionality and morale. What emerges is less a shared experience of a coherent professional community but rather a sense of professional fortitude. It is this fortitude – and the range of principled decision making strategies adopted – which particularly illustrate the power of individual narratives and potential *capital* that these narratives afford the narrators (Goodson, 2013).

At a time of all-pervading centralising, bureaucratic control, a re-assertion of the need to focus on professional trajectory as 'an ongoing process of negotiation and construction of meaning that involves representations, beliefs, skills, expectations, biographies and situated practices' (Marsico, 2012, p.128) is paramount. Development of professionality through professional narrativity offers an opportunity to reclaim a territory for youth practitioners which reflects the core values embodied in the history of youth work and its practices.

There are broader implications here too for de-professionalisation in related education and welfare communities. School Direct (NCTL, 2016), routes to Qualified Teacher Status, stripped of traditional academic study, place a greater emphasis on competence, technique and skill, rather than on professional knowledge and values. Whilst this may initially place greater pragmatic emphasis on an orientation to role performance, it is likely to be at the expense of developed and sustained professionality. Ironically this may mean that practitioners are less likely to withstand pressures of working within continued neoliberal policy and practice disconnects.

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