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## **The Standard for Childhood Practice - 10 years on**

### **Aims and background**

The aim of this study was to explore views and attitudes towards the Standard for Childhood Practice (SSSC, 2016b) with students on the Childhood Practice programmes (BA and M.Ed) at the University of Glasgow. In 2007, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) introduced the first benchmark Standard for Childhood Practice (SCP), in order to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in the delivery of Childhood Practice qualifications. This guidance enabled HEIs to introduce and develop programmes suitable for the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector in Scotland, whilst setting out general expectations and capabilities that graduates of such programmes should be seen to demonstrate. In practice, it appears to work well, with the programmes being favourably considered in independent enquiries (Education Scotland, 2012; SSSC, 2014). In 2015, the SCP was revised, to more fully reflect the changing needs of the ELC sector. Now, over a decade on from its introduction, the SCP remains a key framework for HEIs and Childhood Practice students.

### **Methodology and methods**

Following ethical approval, students from across both Childhood Practice programmes at the University of Glasgow were invited to take part in a discussion group. The nine participating students were experienced practitioners (minimum four years post qualification) from various types of settings (early years, out of school care, residential care, local authority, private, third sector). Students were completing their qualification by requirement or voluntarily.

This varied participating group allowed for insights from practitioners' perspectives to be obtained (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013), generating qualitative data. Following Oates (2006), the methodology was adopted at the levels of ontology, epistemology and axiology, allowing the project to be situated within an interpretivist paradigm, accepting in accordance with Lincoln et al (2011) that experiences and feelings provide valuable data to examine people's lives. The project did not seek nor claim generalisability or representativeness (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013), however it provided some insight into the views of those who are required to meet the SCP (SSSC, 2016b).

Thematic analysis was adopted to examine the data, considering both literature and data in supporting any tentative claims made (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with theory reinforcing the

analysis and clarifying what was said, allowing codes, categories and themes to be created. The following section presents the findings, using participants' own narratives to describe their experiences of the SCP (SSSC, 2016b).

## Findings and discussion

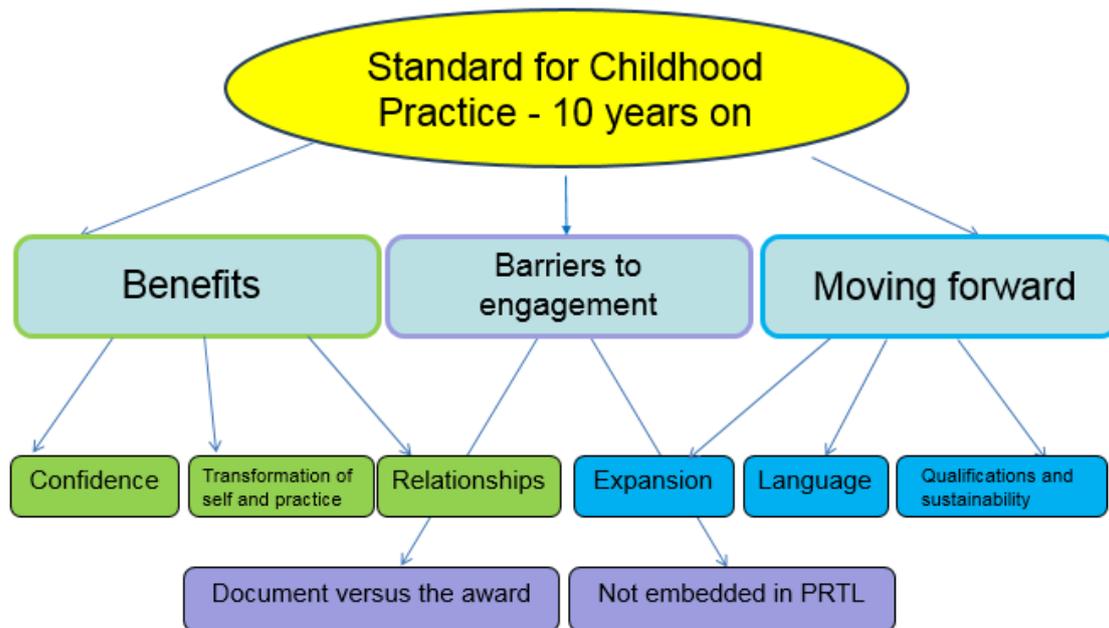


Figure 1. Thematic map.

Analysis of the transcripts identified three core themes relating to the participants' experiences of the SCP (SSSC, 2016b): benefits of the document, barriers to engagement and ideas for development moving forward. Under each core theme, a number of subthemes were identified (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participants identified a number of benefits as a result of engaging with the Standard (SSSC, 2016b), including confidence, professional relationships and the transformation of their professional identity and practice: 'I actually feel like a professional' (P1); 'It's how you project yourself now' (P2). From these and similar comments, it seemed that participants perceived themselves to be more professional and this, in turn, resulted in enhanced service provision (Fazey and Fazey, 2001). Participants reported experiencing higher levels of self-actualisation, enhancing the social capital they generate in their field (ibid).

In relation to the theme of moving forward, participants considered a number of ways in which the SCP (SSSC, 2016b) supported the development of the sector and how this, in turn,

might necessitate further development of the document. Positively, the language of the benchmarks was seen to clarify key terminology: 'It actually puts it down there in black and white, you know, bullet points, what the expectations are' (P1). As well as being open-ended enough to include practitioners across the range of childhood practice settings: 'Anything you try and find for additional support, for homecare, for out of school care, for children with complex needs...' (P7). In tension with this, participants articulated strongly their perception that the language and framing of the benchmark statements contributed to a view amongst practitioners not holding designated leadership roles that the SCP is solely for use by managers. Participants described this perception as being detrimental to practitioners' professional development, discouraging frontline staff from engaging with the document: 'Cause I think they look at it and just see a lot of what they deem to be management, cause it's not management any more, everybody has to take those roles' (P6).

Further barriers to engagement were also highlighted by the discussion. For example, participants generally stated that undertaking Childhood Practice qualifications increased their awareness of the SCP document, with this, in turn, supporting self-reflection and professional development (SSSC, 2016a). However, a recurring theme was conflation of the Childhood Practice awards and the Standard for Childhood Practice document: 'I've learned so much doing the Standard for Childhood Practice' (P5). The implication was that students believed that once they had completed the programme of study, they had 'completed' the SCP, suggesting that use of the document after attainment of the award may be limited, undermining its potential to support and guide continuous professional learning. This echoes the conclusions of Forde et al. (2016) in relation to school teachers that standards have potential to support career-long professional development but only when effectively contextualised within practice.

## **Implications and conclusions**

These findings suggest implications for developing effective practice in use of the SCP document at various levels. Firstly, in the context of rapid developments within the ELC sector (Dunlop, 2015), participants identified changing some of the language within the SCP (SSSC, 2016b) as an important step: 'I think as well everything that's happening with the expansion... there could be more tweaks in it...because everybody's role's changing...' (P4). Specifically, replacing the phrase 'Managers/lead practitioners...' at the start of each

benchmark with more inclusive language could help underline the relevance of the Standard to all practitioners in line with stated intentions for the document (SSSC, 2016b:4).

Building on this, in order to embed the SCP (SSSC, 2016b) into everyday practice, we recommend that the SSSC introduce a requirement for all practitioners to link entries in their Professional Registration and Training Log with associated benchmarks of the Standard (SSSC, 2016a). Within the wider policy context, incorporating references to specific benchmarks within policy documents could support practitioners in making further connections and enhance the profile of the sector.

From the data presented, it is possible to conclude that students from various settings within Childhood Practice studying at both under-and postgraduate level within this University context, find the SCP document (SSSC, 2016b) a valuable resource to support their personal and professional development as leaders. As the sector evolves, Childhood Practice award providers will need to review programmes regularly taking account of the changing demographic of the students in order that the programmes meet their evolving leadership development needs and continue to support them in meeting the Standard for Childhood Practice.

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