Becoming a speech and language therapist:
A qualitative exploration of the experiences of male speech and language therapy students and early career professionals

Submitted by Hazel Ruth Bending to the University of Exeter

as a thesis for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Education

In November 2012

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature: ……..

Abstract

At present there are approximately 13,000 registered speech and language therapists, the majority of these are female. The current ratio of male to female professionals in the United Kingdom stands at 3:100. A decade ago, the figure stood at 1.9% (Sheridan 1999), indicating that in recent years, the number of male professionals has been gradually rising, however, this figure remains low in comparison to other professions within the health and education sectors. Previous research has offered explanations for the lack of diversity in the profession (Greenwood et al 2006, McAllister and Neve 2005), citing poor remuneration, employment opportunities and knowledge base of the profession; this has resulted in few men choosing to enter the profession. In addition, it means that male students are likely to find themselves as the sole male in a cohort of students. The minority status that such a position entails is thought to lead to negative consequences, reduced motivation and feelings of isolation (Boyd and Hewlett 2001).

This research examined the everyday lived experiences of being a male student speech and language therapist in order to develop an understanding of how they constructed their professional identity and to ascertain whether their gender identity influences this journey.

Twelve male speech and language therapy students and early career professionals were interviewed with a semi-structured format through a variety of mediums. The participants shared their stories and experiences of being a speech and language therapy student in both the university and clinical settings.

The participants shared their experiences of isolation and of dealing with the assumptions that other professionals made about their position within the speech and language therapy profession and these experiences were reported to have had an effect on both their training and their positioning within the wider profession.

Contents

Abstract 2
Contents 3
List of Figures 6
List of abbreviations, annotations and terminology 7
Chapter one: Introduction 8
1.1. Literature context 8
1.2. Current health policy context 9
1.3. Personal context 10
1.4. Research focus 10
Chapter two: Literature Review 12
2.1. Positioning identity 12
2.2. The acquisition and construction of a gender identity 14
2.3. Speech and language therapy, caring and science. 19
2.4. Becoming and being a student 24
2.5. Becoming a professional and commencing professional practice 27
2.6. Chapter Summary 31
Chapter three: Methodology 33
3.1. The study 33
3.2. Identifying the influences 33
3.3. The researcher, the participants and their relationship 36
3.4. Ethical considerations 38
3.5. Data collection 41
3.5.1. Phase One; The Questionnaire 42
3.5.2. Phase Two; The interviews 43
3.5.2.1. Face to Face Interviews 45
3.5.2.2. Interviews via 'Skype' 45
3.5.2.3. Telephone Interviews 46
3.5.2.4. Email interviews 46
3.5.3. Reflections on the performance of the interviews. 47
3.6. Analysis 48
3.7. Writing and representation 50
Chapter four: Experiences of male speech and language therapy students 52
4.1. Isolation 52
4.2. Noticing difference and isolation 53
4.3. Dealing with the isolation 55

4.4. Confronting the isolation 60
4.5. Chapter Summary 61
Chapter five: Assumptions about men 64
5.1. 'Men need complexity' 64
5.2. 'Men work better with men' 67
5.3. 'Men should not work with children' 69
5.4. 'Men should be role models' 70
5.5. 'Men should be managers not therapists' 72
5.7. 'Females mother, but men are professional' 75
5.8. Chapter Summary 76
Chapter six: Becoming a speech and language therapist 79
6.1. Identification with the profession 79
6.2. Being a student speech and language therapist 84
6.3. Beginning the customs of the profession 89
6.4. Finding employment 92
6.5. Chapter summary 93
Chapter seven: Discussion and conclusions 95
7.1. Emerging positions within professional identity 95
7.1.1. 'Laid-back student' 97
7.1.2. 'Rescuer' 98
7.1.3. 'Unicorn' 101
7.1.4. Summary 102
7.2. Lived experience of being a male speech and language therapy student ... 103
7.2.1. How does gender impact on their experience of becoming a qualified speech and language therapist? 103
7.2.2. How do the male students' experiences differ from their perceptions of their female peers' experiences? 106
7.2.3. How do the students identify as being a member of the speech and language therapy profession? 108
7.3. Implications for practice 109
7.4. Final conclusions 112
Appendix 1; Pen portraits of the participants 114
Appendix 2; Email to potential participants 120
Appendix 3: Précis of the research 121
Appendix 4: Consent form 122
Appendix 5: Paper version of on-line questionnaire 123
Appendix 6: Interview schedule (verbal interviews) 126
Appendix 7: Interview schedule (written format) 127

Appendix 8: Example of vertical analysis/memo 128
Appendix 9: Example of data analysis; Coding 129
Appendix 10: Pictorial representation of theme, subthemes and links to participants130
Appendix 11: Association of codes, themes and chapters 131
Appendix 12: Certificate of ethical approval 137
References 141

List of Figures

Figure 1: Table of themes 50
Figure 2: Alternative professions considered 80
Figure 3: 'I can identify positively with the profession' 82