
Will the Early Years Professional Please Stand Up? Professionalism in the Early Childhood Workforce in England

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ABSTRACT This article explores, through a review of a body of literature, whether it is possible to create a new understanding of what it means to be a professional in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England. It reviews some competing views of the nature of professionalism and then explores the distinctive attributes and qualities required by practitioners through discussing the demands required of both care and education. The article reconceptualises professional identity in ECEC in England using three themes identified from a 'ground-up' study of professionalism undertaken by Dalli in New Zealand – (a) pedagogical style, (b) specialist professional knowledge, and (c) practices and collaborative relations. The discussion is situated in the framework of government initiatives in the United Kingdom that have formulated a more 'technicist' approach to professionalisation through the graduate status of the Early Years Professional.

As a lecturer in Early Childhood Education working with students who are already practitioners in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce in England, I have been privileged to have many discussions over the years with part-time, mature, undergraduate students, many of whom work full-time providing services for children and their families. I am aware that many of them have worked through a period of enormous change (Nutbrown & Page, 2008) and sought to continually keep themselves updated with information and skills to ensure they provide excellent services. I am also aware of the frustration felt by the changing boundaries, expectations and requirements that are externally imposed on them and their practice (Cooke & Lawton, 2008). For many of the students, entering higher education reveals inbuilt insecurities and lack of confidence (Nurse, 2007) that is not evident in their daily practice. This complex interplay of identities is something that is explored, through a review of a body of literature, in an attempt to articulate some of the layers of meaning attached to the notions of professionalism within ECEC (Osgood, 2006a, 2010; Dalli, 2008) and how they may be applied within the English early years context.

The context for this consideration is the workforce in England which has undergone significant change since the Labour government introduced its National Childcare Strategy (DfEE, 1997). Before this date, there was limited state-funded early education and what was available was usually linked to areas of disadvantage. Non-educational early years provision, such as day nurseries and child-minders, were registered with social services, and sessional playgroups or preschools were providing early education for three and four years olds (Lloyd, 2012). The decision by the government to provide an entitlement for all three and four year olds to universal and free part-time early education in the National Childcare Strategy has had significant impact upon workforce development. One of these developments has been the move to integrate the provision for early education with care provision, which was formalised in the Childcare Act 2006, which established that 'early years provision' includes early learning, development and care. Most of this provision is delivered through private-for-profit and not-for profit settings (Department for

Education [DfE] 2010), and Lloyd (2012) suggests this reliance upon the private sector is unusual within Europe.

Alongside these changes there was a move to establish frameworks for practice with the launch of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (Qualification and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2000) which provided guidelines for children's learning and development from three to five years of age. This was shortly followed by *Birth to Three Matters* (Sure Start/DFES, 2003), a framework of support and guidance for those working with younger children. These early documents were replaced by the statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Children, School and Families [DCSF], 2008) which first brought care and education elements together for all early childcare providers, and which have recently been updated in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2012). This involvement by central government in the day-to-day activities that need to be undertaken in the lives of young children represent, for me, part of the shift within the early years that could be seen to privilege an outcomes-driven agenda linked to curriculum delivery.

Moss (2010) contends that in relation to early childhood workers and professionalism, there is an on-going challenge from the uneasy relationship between ECEC and the compulsory education system in relation to professional identities. This current boundary between professionals in schools, usually teachers, and the ECEC workforce provides a background for considering the challenges of professionalisation within ECEC and the way that these echo the divide that there is in practice in the early childhood sector itself between care and education (McGillivray, 2008; Lloyd & Hallet, 2010). These two, at times competing, requirements of care and education for the youngest children have been part of the narrative of identity of early years professionals and will be explored in an attempt to construct a view of professionalism that allows both to be valued. In some ways the differences between the requirements of care and education are also still reflected in the divide between those who work with the under-threes and over-threes. Although the EYFS has sought to bridge the gap by formulating a single curriculum document, the division seems deep-rooted in attitudes and feelings (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010). Tickell (2011), in her review of the EYFS, has chosen to reemphasise the difference by focussing many recommendations around the 24-36 month age group and talking about a 'transition to nursery provision' (p. 23) at three years of age. Therefore it can be seen that within the workforce there are multiple ongoing and longstanding layers of division that work to shape ideas and constructs of professionalism in ECEC.

The ECEC workforce is a complex organism, a community that can be made up of a range of different roles and job titles (Osgood, 2006b; Adams, 2008), and the work they undertake is carried out in a variety of settings in which the EYFS is delivered. McGillivray (2008) suggests there is also confusion over the range of titles for people working with young children, as different titles contribute to different understandings of professional identity, even though individuals may be undertaking similar jobs (Adams, 2008), such as nursery nurse, early years educator, practitioner, teacher. This confusion exists not only for those within the ECEC sector, but also makes it difficult for the general public who find it difficult to clearly identify the workforce and this therefore impacts upon the discourses of professionalism within ECEC. The Childcare Act 2006 added another category to the range of titles in ECEC, with the establishment of a new leadership status within ECEC through the development of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). It is intended that these professionals will lead practice in implementation of the EYFS, act as agents of change and raise standards in settings (Miller, 2008, p. 259). Critics (Taggart, 2011, p. 88) suggest the EYPS provides an example of a particular form of professionalism which Osgood (2010, p. 120) argues foregrounds a neo-liberal, 'technicist' approach in which individuals must perform a style of professionalism and are judged by an external set of criteria. To achieve the EYPS, candidates have to demonstrate that they meet a set of 39 standards, which at the time of writing this article are under review. This raises concerns about the nature of professional practice that is being assessed, for example, whether use of the standards is able to measure, support or acknowledge some of those professional traits that many in the workforce would deem essential to effective practice, such as passion and caring (Brock, 2006; Taggart, 2011). It is within this complex and changing context that I shall now begin to consider whether it is possible to articulate notions of professionalism from different perspectives and what implications this might have for those involved in the professional development of the workforce.

What is a Professional?

There are many interpretations of 'professionalism' and it has been suggested that these are not universally understood (Oberhuemer, 2005). Acknowledging that professionalism is a contested concept (Furlong et al, 2000; Simpson, 2010) makes space for the possibility of a new form of professional identity to emerge. Osgood (2006a) clearly believes that the ECEC community should be engaging in this process of constructing a view of professionalism for the workforce, that situates them as part of the process, rather than accepting an externally constructed identity. This is a view also advocated by Dalli who argues that those working in the sector have clear ideas about 'behaviours, attitudes and skills' (2008, p. 183) that would denote professional behaviour. Simpson (2010) suggests some agreement with the view of an internally constructed or activist approach to professionalism, by considering ideas around the way those who are part of a profession could have some ownership of the discourses of professional standards and qualities.

Lloyd and Hallet suggest there is a more traditionally accepted framework of a professional which includes three main elements: 'the monopolisation of specific and exclusive skills and knowledge; group member solidarity; and restricted access to learning opportunities requiring accreditation to practice' (2010, p. 76). The suggestion here links the ideas of competence to practice with accreditation, possibly as part of a professional body, and suggests a limited opportunity for membership of a select body. It is clear that the ECEC workforce does not make this requirement as there is room for practitioners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding while engaging in practice (Musgrave, 2010). Osgood (2009) suggests that a narrow view of professionalism, such as that suggested by Lloyd and Hallet (2010), reflects middle class notions of a professional as a 'distinguished and learned individual with significant expertise' (Osgood, 2009, p. 738). This framing suggests ideas about origins of professionalism that value knowledge over skills (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 44), with a requirement for engaging in extensive learning before significant practice is undertaken, and also possibly the privileging of the mind over physical work. Clearly such ideas come into conflict when they are sought to be applied to notions of professionalism in ECEC, where working with young children requires engagement in the physical, and often manual, work required for care and education of young children. Work with young children also requires engagement at an emotional level in order for professionals to tune in to the needs and requirements of both children and their parents (Nutbrown & Page, 2008; Taggart, 2011). The challenges of fitting some of these fundamental practices into any existing construction of professionalism are part of the reason there has been significant debate from within the early years sector suggesting that professionalism in ECEC needs reframing (Dalli, 2008; Osgood, 2010).

At the same time, discourses from the political arena are challenging ideas of professionalism right across the education sector, not just ECEC. Moss suggests that the discourses of 'quality', 'best practice' and 'evidence based practice' (2010, p. 10) are creating a system that implies there is only one right way of doing things, and that the professional has been reinterpreted as a 'technician' (p. 12). It could be argued that the EYPS, with its focus on meeting a set of assessable standards, would fit this category of 'technician' (Simpson, 2010).

The Developing Workforce

In order to situate the current context and identity of the ECEC professional, it is helpful to consider in more detail some of the changes that have impacted the workforce in England since the spotlight was focussed on early years provision in 1997 with the National Childcare Strategy (DfES, 1997). Osgood (2009) suggests that ECEC at the time was the means through which the government aimed to achieve its objective of engaging more women and mothers in the workforce. Cooke and Lawton (2008) describe the ECEC services as 'critical to delivery of both economic prosperity and social justice' (p. 6), but go on to acknowledge how challenging this is for policymakers because of the issues around 'quality' and wages. These discourses of the late 1990s (Osgood, 2009) also suggested the need to reform the workforce, and there followed a decade of significant change, both in terms of financial support for children to attend preschool, but also prescription about what happens while children are in day care or early education provision.

The *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES, 2005) suggested there was a need to focus on the skills, training and career paths of those working within the early years sector to reflect the growing demands, including integrated working, that were being made of early childhood practitioners. The strategy was supported with significant financial investment from the government through the Transformation Fund and the Graduate Leader Fund. The funding supported a clearly articulated policy which aimed to provide for the employment of a graduate Early Years Professional (EYP) or early years teacher in each group childcare setting, as well as increasing the qualification to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 of 70% of the workforce (DfES, 2005).

One of the key elements of the early years (EY) workforce strategy was this move towards a graduate led workforce, but this was a move that had started several years earlier, influenced by the findings of the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al, 2004), and illustrated with the emergence of foundation degrees. Foundation degrees were launched as a higher education award aimed at those in the workplace, combining academic study with work-based practice. From the beginning, the government in the UK was keen to support the delivery of foundation degrees in the early years sector through 'Sector Endorsement' and significant financial support, including bursaries, supply cover and laptop loans to the first cohorts. These Sector Endorsed foundation degrees in Early Years (FdEY) promised to provide the sector with 'senior practitioners', a qualification that was designed to enable 'practitioners to be valued as professionals' (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010, p. 78) and suggested the possibility of some type of career progression linked to qualifications. Within the FdEY, professional development was a key strand, as identified in the *Statement of Requirements* (DfES, 2002), and one which my own course team spent many hours reflecting upon in terms of effective delivery, in order to improve the understanding of students who were engaging with the concept – possibly for the first time – in a reflective way.

However, as Lloyd and Hallet identify, the role of 'senior practitioner' was never fully articulated and soon became replaced by the EYPS, leaving many FdEY graduates feeling 'unfulfilled' and let down in terms of professional recognition (2010, p. 78). The EYPS was linked to supporting the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda (DfES, 2004) which was to provide a better qualified workforce with many more workers trained to professional standard (Moss, 2006). In the current situation where there is a plentiful supply of labour and an unwillingness of parents to pay higher fees, the economics of the EY sector have resulted in a largely private sector market provision, in which most of the workforce 'frequently earn little more than minimum wage' (Lloyd, 2012, p. 112) even with increased numbers of qualified practitioners. There has also been limited public recognition of the growing numbers of staff with qualifications, with Simpson (2010) reporting conversations with those who had obtained the EYPS in which issues of ongoing struggle and antagonistic relationships within education workplaces were raised.

Urban (2010) suggests that there is a broad consensus that the workforce is central to achieving current UK policy goals relating to quality and quantity of provision, and he suggests these discourses also imply that the workforce is something that needs to be professionalised in order to cope with the increasing requirements and challenges of the work. It is suggested by O'Keefe and Tait that although the workforce is generally viewed as non-teaching, 'in reality practitioners require the significant repertoire and skill of the teacher' (2004, p. 27). In other words, practitioners for a long time have been working within a framework of professionalism that make high demands of them in terms of skills and knowledge which could be deemed to illustrate professional competency. But, as Moyles (2001) points out, the public perception that EY practitioners are of low status and are only due low pay, serves to limit practitioners' self-confidence and self-esteem and often finds expression in an apologetic view of their job role. However, O'Keefe and Tait (2004) suggest that increasing opportunities for achieving recognition through qualifications are impacting practitioners' views of themselves in a more positive way.

Reconceptualising Professionalism in ECEC

Simpson (2010) explores the contributions of professionals to their own role definition through an 'activist perspective' (p. 272), which would see constructions of professionalism starting from practitioners within their communities of practice, and from there beginning to influence ideas in

wider society. This activist approach is also supported by Osgood (2006a, 2009, 2010), who sees this type of action as essential to avoid what is otherwise a narrow definition of professionalism now situated in the role of the EYPS, a role and identity that 'represents government constructions of professionalism' (Osgood, 2009, p. 744). Statutory requirements and guidance such as the EYFS (DCSF, 2008) are central to this new form of professionalism which 'emphasises increased state involvement, accountability and performance targets' (Simpson, 2010, p. 271). Osgood (2006a) suggests one of the key aspects that professionals in early childhood need to embrace is therefore a social constructivist approach to identity and role definition; she argues that in order to do this professionals need to develop effective reflective and reflexive practice. Reflexivity will allow practitioners not only to engage in a deeper level of understanding through reflection upon their practice, it will also enable them to develop and take their ideas forward as agents of change (Faux, 2010).

One example perhaps of this type of approach is a study by Dalli (2008, p. 174) undertaken to explore 'the evolving characteristics of early childhood professional practice' through a national postal survey of the views of early childhood teachers in New Zealand. As part of that survey, teachers were asked to answer three questions around professionalism and professional practice, and Dalli argues that these views contribute to a ground-up definition of professionalism that reflects teachers' experiences. The findings indicated that three main themes emerged: 'a) pedagogical style, b) specialist professional knowledge, c) practices and collaborative relations' (p. 175). In considering how to begin to conceptualise notions of professionalism in the ECEC workforce in England, these themes provide a helpful framework. In the rest of this article, I consider each one in turn in relation to current literature to further explore how they might contribute to notions of professionalism in England.

Pedagogical Style

Moyle (2002) argues the notion of pedagogy is considered complex, however Siraj-Blatchford's (2009) definition, 'the practice, science or art of teaching' (p. 147), gives a starting point for this discussion. By this definition, a pedagogue teaches and pedagogical practice must embrace teaching. However, the terms of 'teacher' and 'pedagogue' have not sat comfortably with early years practitioners, as historically they have been associated with those working in compulsory education.

This troubling issue of the role of the teacher, or teaching, in the lives of young children is complicated by the fact that the ECEC workforce already comprises both those who have the formal status of teacher, and work within maintained or state schools [1], nurseries and occasionally other provision, and a range of other practitioners in ECEC who are seen to provide learning and teaching experiences through the delivery of the EYFS. Adams (2008) notes the lack of a clear statement about the educative role within job titles in the early childhood workforce in Scotland, a picture that is consistent with the rest of the UK, and suggests this could well be central to the struggle for professionalism in the sector because of the higher value placed on education in public discourses. Perhaps this is why Nutbrown (2012), in her interim report on the review of current qualifications, has raised the question of the need to consider whether a case should be made for an initial teacher training route for early years as exists, for example, in New Zealand.

Additionally the status of teacher is sometimes seen as something to be guarded and protected, and it is suggested that where teachers continue to be employed in childcare centres 'they are less willing to relinquish power to differently qualified personnel' (Adams, 2008, p. 201). Discourses from practitioners in the sector such as those gathered by O'Keefe and Tait reinforce this view in their comment, 'we hoped we were going to be classed as professionals but reality today is if you want any recognition at all you've got to become teachers' (2004, p. 32).

Despite this current arena of contestation within the early years sector, it may be worth reflecting that the teaching profession in the English compulsory school sector itself, has also been through a similar emergence of professional identity. Nurse (2007) suggests that 30 years ago the debate was about whether primary school teachers could be deemed 'professional' in comparison with secondary school teachers, who she claims definitely were. It is suggested that teachers faced the conflicts between the 'supposed professional thinking and expertise ... with levels of

prescription, and performance-related pay in an uneasy juxtaposition' (Moyles, 2001, p. 82). This has echoes of the situation now created by the role of EYPS and the tension between prescriptive control from the government and the autonomy of those within the workforce.

The publication of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) (QCA, 2000) was perhaps a first indication of the changes occurring around concepts of the professional identities within the ECEC workforce, as the notion of a curriculum implies notions of pedagogy attached to implementing it (Furlong et al, 2000). Edgington (2004) suggests young children need specialist teachers implying there is a specific pedagogy that needs to be embraced. Siraj-Blatchford (2009, p. 156) argues this pedagogy is not about 'formal approaches, but relationships, co-construction of knowledge and use of appropriate instruction techniques such as modelling and demonstrating, explanation and questioning'. This pedagogical approach acknowledges that the young child is part of a wider community and that more than in any other area of education, the practitioner needs to be able to work with a range of people beyond the child to the parents and carers, in order for the collaborative and shared understandings that are a feature of good early years practice to develop. This is something to be celebrated by those who skilfully negotiate the many challenges required to accomplish this successfully (Manning-Morton, 2006; Taggart, 2011).

The articulation of pedagogical principles within ECEC, such as those suggested by Siraj-Blatchford (2009), are now embedded within current curriculum documents, suggesting that perhaps the next issue to consider is how practitioners gain the skills to interpret and implement these principles. Current policy now implies the requirement of a graduate to fulfil the demand of leading practice and the EYPS is seen as the one able to take the lead in this process. This discussion around the aspect of formal teaching as part of EC pedagogical style is clearly one that should assist the professionalisation of the sector, as teaching and education are seen as valued within current discourses. As practitioners learn to articulate the processes they engage with in providing good quality experiences for both learning and teaching, a better understanding of this aspect of professional practice could emerge.

Specialist Professional Knowledge and Practice

The second aspect of professionalism emerging from Dalli's (2008) study revolves around knowledge and practice where 'knowledge about children and the 'theory of early childhood education' was seen as central to professionalism' (p. 178). Moyles (2001) suggests the specialist knowledge and practice relating to the care of young children is often apologised for rather than celebrated as a skill. Part of this may be due to the values and understanding placed around what Campbell and Page (2003) describe as the 'ethics of care'. This concept is drawn from work by Noddings (2003; Bergman, 2004) and Goldstein (1998) and has entered the debate (Bergman, 2004; McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006) as an aspect for consideration in all educational practice. However it is engagement with the requirements of care that often perpetuates the feminised and mothering discourses that suggest ECEC is an easy job and any one can do it (McGillivray, 2008). These feminised stereotypes around the need for nurture and care still dominate public attitudes and official discourses about childcare (Colley, 2006; Lloyd & Hallet, 2010) and often stand in conflict with notions of professionalism that include requirements for highly trained, degree-educated individuals (McGillivray, 2008).

Yet, operating emotionally at a 'mindful' level requires higher order thinking (Moyles, 2001, p. 84) and is not just something that anyone can do. If therefore emotions are to be engaged in work with children there also needs to be the skill to know how and when to place boundaries in relationships (Cameron, 2006, p. 70), particularly in order that parents do not feel threatened that those who care for their young children are supplanting them in their affections. At the same time, the understanding of the importance of attachment relationships, and key person responsibilities, require skilful and knowledgeable practitioners to negotiate the boundaries to allow meaningful relationships, even though those relationships will come to an end as children transition between settings (Elfer et al, 2003). The requirement therefore for the engagement of emotions is a specific and particular aspect of the work of the ECEC workforce, as these emotions allow practitioners to engage in the task of protecting and supporting children, as well as engaging with the family and community that surround the child (Osgood, 2006a). There is therefore a requirement to construct

a professionalism that allows this ethic of care to be embraced as part of the identity, rather than seen as something that inhibits or disempowers a professional identity (Dalli, 2008). Indeed Taggart (2011) suggests it should become a 'central plank of professionalism' (p. 85) for the ECEC practitioner.

Another affective domain that is recognised as part of the attitudes owned by many who work in early childhood is that of passion. Moyles observes that 'those working with young children often express a passion for their role and their children which is perhaps difficult for those in other phases of education to understand' (2001, p. 81). It could be argued that these discourses of emotion are in conflict with those of a professionalism such as that of the EYPS which requires a measurable, technicist approach (Simpson, 2010) because it is very hard to measure an affective domain. However, Page (Nutbrown & Page, 2008) argues that it is time to recognise this quality as vital and suggests framing it as 'professional love' (p. 182). O'Keefe and Tait (2004) suggest passion within early childhood can also be demonstrated through the altruistic and personal and professional motivation displayed by practitioners, not least in their efforts to remain true to their understanding of the needs of children that cannot be target driven and outcomes based. Passion can also be seen in the willingness of many in the workforce to respond to the new training drivers of the Foundation degrees and EYPS in order to update their practice and enhance their provision. Indeed it has been suggested that practitioners often value their qualifications as a marker of professionalism (Dalli, 2008). Adams (2008) argues that taking on further study demonstrates engagement with characteristics that can be related to a professional attitude even if they have been driven through an external motivator.

As well as an ethic of care and the notion of emotional engagement in the role, there is also a body of knowledge and understanding related to ECEC which historically has been formalised and delivered through a wide range of qualifications and in-service training opportunities (Musgrave, 2010). The current move to revise and rationalise the qualification framework has led some to question (Cameron, 2006, p. 70) whether this 'unique body of knowledge' can really be met through vocational qualifications such as NVQ3.[2] This is because those studying vocational awards are accredited while in employment, sometimes by the managers or supervisors of the setting they work in, and therefore may only reflect the knowledge and skills currently in use in practice or from previous employers if these skills are not acquired through formal training.

However, as ECEC becomes a more accepted field of study, through for example the development of undergraduate and postgraduate courses (O'Keefe & Tait, 2004), one consequence is that the body of knowledge in the field is growing; this provides a challenge for all working in the field to remain updated not just with new developments, but in response to changes in society. For example, Musgrave (2010) suggests a greater need for recognition of the multi-ethnic, multicultural society we live in; this being a field perhaps where we need more specific knowledge in relation to early childhood development. I would also argue that new demands such as those brought by inclusive practice have required substantial additional knowledge in areas such as working with special educational needs and multilingual and bilingual children. Being part of such a changing context requires practitioners to be responsive and flexible. This can be deemed to be demonstrated through the ability to be a reflective and reflexive practitioner (Manning-Morton, 2006), one of the traits demanded of an early years professional and one that perhaps demands graduate status as a higher order thinking skill. Moyles indicates that reflection is the place where 'both head and heart need to meet' (2001, p. 89), where the emotion and affective domain vital to the ethic of care, can meet the knowledge and understanding of early childhood. It is the place where the general and theoretical becomes embodied in the specific and the individual, and where the early years practitioner develops their practice and professionalism.

Collaborative Relations

The final component of a ground-up definition of professionalism in ECEC, as suggested by Dalli (2008), is in the aspect of relationships. As has already been indicated, ECEC has always required sensitive and caring relations with children, their families and the wider community to which they belong. But since ECM (DfES, 2004), there has also been a legislated requirement in the UK for collaboration across agencies. For some young children and their families their lives include

engagement with a wide range of professionals including those in health and social care. To work together as partners in a multidisciplinary way needs individuals to respect and value the contributions that each other brings. This brings with it a requirement for changing roles in light of requirements for working together (Brooker, 2007). Often the ECEC practitioner will be the one who knows the most detail about the child as they see them on a regular basis. Taking part in meetings and all the attendant requirements for high quality communication, such as report writing, and respect for issues, such as confidentiality, indicate this aspect of practice as one that reflects a clear dimension of professionalism (Cameron, 2006).

Interestingly there is also discussion to suggest that the relational aspect of early childhood practice works to the strengths of the gendered nature of the workforce as Moyles (2001, p. 85) argues that females are known to work more collaboratively and use communication as a significant feature of working relationships. Manning-Morton (2006) supports the view that the essence of day-to-day practice in ECEC is about working relationships with children and families, and that these relationships place high demand on practitioners in terms of physical and emotional engagement, and also personal knowledge and skill. In a multidisciplinary context, the early years practitioner can become the advocate for the child or the family because of their professional knowledge and understanding. Campbell and Page (2003) suggest child-centric concern could be used to help transform approaches to professionalism by highlighting issues concerning young children through networking with early childhood organisations and reflecting with families and children. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) also concurs that ECEC practitioners need to get involved with issues of social justice, as she points out how early issues, such as racism, impact young children's lives. Teaching children and working with families to create learning communities characterised by equality and social justice is clearly a difficult and demanding role, but one that is expected of the early childhood practitioner and one that should be reflected in constructs of professional identity.

The Way Forward

Having considered that there is significant reason to recognise professionalism in ECEC beyond the rigid regimes of the EYPS, the next consideration has to be how a new framing of early years professionalism may be understood. Furlong et al (2000) point to the role played by initial teacher training in influencing the skills, knowledge and values of teachers, in other words those attributes which could be deemed to illustrate professionalism; this suggests therefore there is a significant role to be played by tutors, such as myself, who educate practitioners within higher education.

The current marketisation of the sector means that the challenging pay and conditions of working with the youngest children still continue, and consequently the better graduates from our Early Childhood Studies undergraduate degrees are more likely to be attracted to a formal teaching career, because it has better career and remuneration prospects. While it is vital we have early year specialist teachers, that is only half the battle for changing the professional identity and consequently the conditions of all those working with young children. I argue that it is important to seek to capture and promote aspects of a ground-up professionalism such as: the pedagogical approach that allows recognition of work with the child, as well as with their parent and carers; the recognition of the mindful requirements of an ethic of care; and the importance of reflexivity for professional practice. Celebrating some of these attributes and practices within the work done in higher education may help students to become practitioners who help resist the policy that would limit early years professionalism to the technician approach seen in the introduction of the role of the EYPS.

Introducing the skills and practice of critical reflection, particularly with our more mature students on courses such as the FdEY, could enable enhanced articulation of professional skills and understanding across the sector. Working with mature work-based students in this exploration would then contribute to the knowledge, skills and understandings we want to develop with our full-time undergraduates as we prepare them for work. Even if these students go on to teach older children, better understandings of the professional nature of work undertaken with children in the EYFS should help develop collaborative opportunities.

If there is to be a reconceptualisation of professionalism in ECEC, there is a need to see far more celebration around the unique nature of the sector and the evolving quality of early

childhood practice (Dalli, 2008, p. 174). For those who work in the sector, self-evaluation (Jones & Pound, 2008) provides a context where best practice can be demonstrated through critical reflection. As educators it is important therefore to provide our students with not only the tools to engage in this activity, but also the conditions of time, space and opportunity which will allow these skills to be nurtured and developed (Moyles, 2001). In doing this, it is hoped that an emerging workforce will claim and own their professional identities in such a way that the nature of childcare and education gains some of the value and status it deserves.

Notes

- [1] Maintained schools in England provide education for children from four to sixteen years old. The EYFS curriculum covers the Reception Year for four to five years olds in school. At five years old children begin to be taught in line with the National Curriculum requirements.
- [2] National Vocational Qualifications are awards based on the assessment of work-based practice. Currently the Level 3 is the required qualification for a manager of a group setting delivering the EYFS (DfE, 2012).

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