Seven dimensions of professionalism for early years education and care: a model of professionalism for interdisciplinary practice?

Avril Brock


This paper presents a model of professionalism for interdisciplinary professionals that has been developed through longitudinal research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England. The empirical study elicits the thinking of a group of early years educators - nursery nurses, teachers, centre managers, headteachers and lecturers - diverse in age, gender, role, ethnicity, training and length of service. The research explores their professionalism, promotes recognition of the complexities of their roles and contributes to a generic model of professionalism for ECEC. The model identifies seven dimensions of professionalism – knowledge, education and training, skills, autonomy, values, ethics and reward, which has emerged from both the empirical study and a theoretical framework generated from the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and education.
A model of professionalism

Early years education requires an articulate, reflexive and highly qualified workforce, since the ability to evaluate and develop policy and practice are key to any claims to professionalism (Hughes and Memmuir 2002; Moyles et al. 2002). The ability to reflect on and evaluate professional knowledge, the professional role and its practical application is therefore an important dimension of professionalism. Yet, historically there have been difficulties in the field of early childhood education and care in defining the professional knowledge, skills, values and beliefs of its practitioners (Katz 1995; Moyles 2001), as these were often tacit and rarely exposed to public scrutiny (Anning 2002). This empirical research ascertains how a sample of early years educators define and sustain their professionalism; it elicits their professional thinking as they voice their critical interests and issues.

Internationally, there are diverse perspectives about professionalism for those working in the field of ECEC. In the USA Katz (1985) proposes eight concepts for a definition of professionalism: social necessity; altruism; autonomy; code of ethics; distance from client; standards of practice; prolonged training and specialised knowledge. In Germany, Oberhuemer (2005) recommends a democratic model of four levels of professional activity: interacting with children; care management and leadership; partnership with parents and knowledge base. In England, this paper presents a model of seven dimensions of professionalism of knowledge, education and training, skills, autonomy, values, ethics, and reward formulated through both the theoretical framework and findings from the empirical data. A literature search across the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and education (including Hugman 1991; Sims, Fine & Gabriel 1993; Friedson 1994; Hoyle & John 1995; Goodson & Hargreaves 2003; Frost 2001; General Teaching Council 2001; Sachs 2003) reveal these seven common traits of professionalism. These dimensions are interconnected and have equal importance, as a ‘well-rounded’ professional requires all of the seven dimensions. Analysis of the data elicited from research sample correlates to these seven dimensions of professionalism and indicates the complexity of their professional knowledge and roles. The findings of fieldwork and literature demonstrate how the voices of those working in the field are necessary to contemporary models aiming to define and sustain their professionalism.

Professionalism - the contemporary debate

Professionalism has merited the attention of the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, history and education. Many draw on Friedson (1994, 7) who suggests that professionalism is not a generic concept, but a ‘concrete, changing, historical and national phenomenon’. In Hoyle and John’s (1995, 1) opinion professionalism ‘defies common agreement as to its meaning’, despite the term’s widespread use in the media and everyday discourse. This lack of consensus occurs because its usage varies both pragmatically and conceptually within a complex society. Helsby (1996, 135) argues that the terms of ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ are often applied to a variety of occupations ‘with elusive and continual reinterpretation of the concepts’. There is a distinction between ‘being a professional’ which includes issues of pay, status, reward, public recognition, and ‘behaving professionally’ which implies dedication, commitment, standards of behaviour and a strong service ethic. Furthermore, Osgood (2006a) argues that components of pay, recognition and reward depict ‘professionalisation’, whilst characteristics of ethics, standards and commitment represent ‘professionalism’. According to Aldridge and Evetts (2003) this all leads to a conclusion that professionalism is not one, but a cluster of related concepts. This paper presents such a cluster of seven dimensions of professionalism derived through the findings of the research.

It is important in contemporary society for occupations to be established as professions, as this should lead to recognition of knowledge, skills, status, remuneration, power and personal success. Dominant groups in society determine what a profession is through negotiation and definition, promoting the concept of professionalism through how they see themselves as professionals. Waring and Waring (2009) believe that ‘within the sociological literature, the everyday language of professionalism has often been marginalised’. In Evetts’ (2006, 515) opinion contemporary interpretations of professionalism are increasingly being used as ‘discourses of occupational change and social control’ and there has been a ‘decline of trust competence and discretion’ for professions. Evetts (2009) suggests that professionals should examine how international occupational groups are applying the discourse of professionalism. Issues about professionalism are therefore not only interdisciplinary but also international - in Europe, Australia and the USA ECEC continues to gain prominence for policy makers (Oberheumer 2005; Cameron 2006; Osgood 2006; Brown 2009).
There has been an ongoing and complex struggle by contemporary professionals to negotiate their professional status with employers, governments, clients and the general public (Frost 2001). Many groups have faced challenges to their authority, legitimacy and inevitably their professionalisation. Furthermore salary level and social status of some professions have constrained their progress towards professional status. This is particularly so in the caring professions of the caring professions of education, nursing and social work, where it is evident, as Forster (2000) observes, that there is still a greater concentration of women in social science disciplines. Fawcett and Alexander (2000) argue that the process of professionalisation for these professions have been re-shaped from a ‘male’ perspective in order to gain acceptance. Those working in ECEC have perhaps had the hardest battle to gain recognition as professionals, not only because they work with the youngest members of society, but also because they are a predominantly female group. Osgood (2004, 20) finds diversity in age, experience, qualifications and professional background of ‘committed and enthusiastic women engaged in widespread training, endeavouring to enhance their professionalism whilst retaining integrity and an ethic of care’. Mayo-Robbins’ (2002) research indicates that age, gender and ethnicity factors interact in complex ways, which affect the experiences of educators. Cameron (2006) and Kilderry (2007) advocate seeking the views of both males and females to provide understandings of how they perceive care, business, professionalism and reward for the ECEC workforce. The study sample[s] in this research are a diverse group of men and women who have varied professional domains in the field in order to access a breadth of professional thinking in the field of ECEC.

A professional working in ECEC could be described as an early childhood educator, teacher, pedagogue or practitioner deploying knowledge not as individuals, but as members of the social institution of the early childhood profession (MacNaughton 2003). Until recently, care and education have been seen as separate entities by government policy frameworks in England, (Curtis and O’Hagan 2003). Traditionally ‘paramedically’ trained workers cared for young children in day-care settings, whilst more academically qualified staff worked in educational settings (Robins and Silcock, 2001). This has led to status differences and ambiguous job classification, yet these roles are not one dimensional, but multifaceted and transdisciplinary. The respondents in this study are accountable for the curriculum and pedagogy; the management of staff, families and children and the interpretation of social policy within their settings. As they have the diverse roles of teachers, nursery nurses, managers and lecturers, they will be referred to as early years educators (EYEs).

The research process

The research develops contemporary definitions and understandings of professionalism for the complex and diverse field of ECEC. It formulates a model of professionalism that promotes a shared professional identity across the professional domains for those working in the early years. The study provides insights into ECEC knowledge domains, demonstrating the interplay between personal voice and professional ideologies and practice. It provides a reflective research model that conceptualises their professional roles in a holistic way indicating the common ground across their professional roles. The model of professionalism provides a shared statement of professionalism for the interdisciplinary field of ECEC and is a valuable tool for continuing professional development. Dissemination of the dimensions of early years professionalism can support advocacy ECEC professionals’ knowledge and values, stimulating professional debate about contemporary issues that concern them.

Timescale of the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Pilot study trialling the methodological techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>Main study gathering data with the sample of 12 early years educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>2006-2009</td>
<td>Trialling the model through continuing professional development seminars and email correspondence resulting from a reflective paper on the TACTYC (Trainers and Cooperating Teachers of Young Children) website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>Follow-up study with nine of the original sample of early years educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5</td>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>Exploration of the model of professionalism across different disciplines working with young children including early years professionals, health, social work, speech and language therapy and librarianship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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This paper will present data gathered in Phase 2 and Phase 4 and the next section introduces the sample of twelve early years educators.

The Study Sample (phase 2 and 4)
The methodology is interpretative/exploratory and elicits the thinking of twelve EYEs across three local authorities - diverse in gender, ethnicity, age, length of service - with the roles of managers, teachers, nursery nurses, headteachers and lecturers. They worked in nursery schools, foundation stage/early years units, reception classes, independent schools, Sure Start, workplace nurseries, college and university. Table 1 demonstrates the ‘balance’ of the respondents’ professional roles. To maintain anonymity and protect the interests of the nine participants in the follow-up research, in this paper they will be referred to by acronyms reflecting the role they held at their place of work in Phase 2 of the research. These are: nursery nurses (NN1; NN2); Foundation Stage Teachers (FST1; FST2); Reception Teachers (RT1; RT2); Headteachers (HT1; HIS); Managers (MWN; MSS); Lecturers (LHE; LFE).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Role and setting in 2000</th>
<th>Role and setting in 2008/2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RT1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>BA History of Art Postgraduate Certificate of Education</td>
<td>Reception teacher in primary school</td>
<td>Moved to USA; at home with two young children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LFE</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>BSc Biochemistry Postgraduate Diploma in Social Administration Postgraduate Certificate of Education D32/33 assessor</td>
<td>Lecturer in Further Education in FE/HE college</td>
<td>Teacher affiliated to a Children’s Centre Freelance researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSS</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>HNC Early Childhood Studies BA Professional Studies Postgraduate Certificate of Education</td>
<td>Manager Sure Start Setting</td>
<td>Early Years Service Freelance Assessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWN</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>Certificate of Education BA Professional Studies</td>
<td>Manager Workplace Nursery</td>
<td>Manager Workplace Nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>BA Divinity Certificate of Education Secondary Masters in Education National Professional Qualification for Headteachers</td>
<td>Headteacher Nursery School</td>
<td>Headteacher/ Children’s Centre Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FST1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>BA (Hons) Early Years Education Advanced Certificate in Early Years</td>
<td>Foundation Stage Teacher in an Early Excellence Centre in Primary School</td>
<td>Unable to contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NN1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>British/Asian</td>
<td>NNEB Nursery Nursing</td>
<td>Nursery Nurse Foundation Stage Unit Primary School</td>
<td>Nursery Nurse Foundation Stage Unit Primary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>British/White</td>
<td>BA (Hons) Primary Education</td>
<td>Reception Teacher in a primary school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: The early years educators

Methodology

The objectives of the research were to elicit early years educators’ thinking to contribute to a potential model of early years professionalism. This was undertaken through exploring their critical issues, the complexities of their roles, their professional knowledge base and the impact of policy change. The research questions addressed were:

- How did the EYEs define their ‘professional’ knowledge?
- What did the EYEs perceive to be the critical issues that affected their practice as EYEs?
- How did the EYEs meet the demands of imposed policy change?
- What were the most effective ways of eliciting the EYEs’ thinking?

Initially a pilot study [phase 1] was undertaken to determine the appropriateness of the research focus, objectives, questions and trial the methodological techniques. Bennett et al.’s (1997) classroom-based research about the role of play in teachers’ provision and Moyles et al.’s (2002) methodology for Supporting Pedagogy in Effective Early Learning (SPEEL) project influenced the research design. In phase 2 the data collection techniques included personal/professional time-lines, continuing professional development questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, reflective-video-dialogues and a focus group meeting. The range of techniques aimed to elicit of the respondents’ thinking in diverse ways and so gain a breadth of perspectives. The continuing professional development questionnaires provided factual data about the respondents’ training, qualifications, experience and working situations. The time-lines afforded factual personal and professional aspects that impacted upon their work and values. The data from the semi-structured interviews, video-reflective-dialogues and focus group meeting elicited data about their professional knowledge, critical issues and impact of policy change that affected their practice.

The respondents themselves were able to raise their interests and concerns regarding their professionalism and professional roles. This was an important feature of the methodology, as rather than directing the participants to respond to specific aspects they were allowed a ‘maximum freedom’ in selecting issues (MacNaughton et al. 2001, 151). For example the semi-structured interview in phase 2 commenced with the open question of ‘How did you become an early years educator?’ and elicited details about why they entered the field, which readily expanded into their issues and interests. In phase 4 the initial opening
question was ‘What has happened in early years and in your job in the last six years?’ also provided lengthy detailed responses.

The data were interrogated and revisited several times mining at deepening levels through content analysis searching for patterns, similarities and differences in definitions and meanings. Constructs were formed from each data collection technique, as multiple layers of meaning and themes emerged though processes of listening to the tapes; content analysis of transcriptions through highlighting, quantifying and concept mapping key aspects raised. A total of 98 codes were allocated across the data sets. The software WINMAX (1994) Computer Assisted Quality Data Analysis Software was employed in the coding, sorting and analysing of data. This software facilitated both qualification and quantification of the data and so determined the key critical issues and interests of the EYE. This analysis process enabled the areas of interest of the sample to be identified through the quantification of the number of ‘hits’ a coding received. Rather than relying on supposition, the ability to measure the number of hits a coding received allowed a more efficient and reliable quantitative analysis of the data to proceed. It also enabled triangulation of the results in that the qualitative and quantitative could be compared and validated against one another. The interviewees each expressed themselves individually – some succinctly, some at length and some in a somewhat repetitive manner. Thus, it was important to verify the consistency of the content analysis to ensure that it reflected the sample’s key interests, since strength of feeling on a matter is not necessarily expressed simply by the amount of words used. The quantification of the coding combined with cross-checking the transcripts of the interviews plus re-listening to the interview recordings made it possible to confirm that the findings matched the key interests of the EYE. Thus, as stated, this method also facilitated cross-checking of the data to ensure triangulation of results.

Three key themes of ‘Professionalism’, ‘Working Relationships’ and ‘Curriculum and Pedagogy’ emerged, which provided the analytical framework from which the critical issues were determined. The EYE indicated that their professional knowledge derives from a combination of theory, experience, skills, training and qualifications. They reflected on children’s learning and development, curriculum and pedagogy, the value of play, children’s individual needs and inclusion. They were concerned about aspects related to their professionalism, including status regarding their professional role; pay, value and acclaim; personal satisfaction and commitment. They raised issues regarding their working relationships with colleagues, parents, communities and local education authorities and reflected on the importance of collaborative teamwork. They gave their perspectives on policy change regarding both positive aspects and those that caused them concerns or pressures, including government initiatives; assessment and inspection processes; curriculum development. The following table indicates the codes/key aspects within the three themes of ‘Professionalism’, ‘Working Relationships’ and ‘Curriculum and Pedagogy’ that received the most ‘hits’ across the sample applied through both qualification and quantification using the WINMAX software.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
<th>Working Relationships</th>
<th>Curriculum and Pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>Knowledge related to theory</td>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>Curriculum knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental psychology</td>
<td>Staff/teamwork</td>
<td>National Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sociocultural theory</td>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>Literacy and numeracy strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ecological theory</td>
<td>Collegiality and significant mentors</td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience and expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skills of monitoring, observing and assessing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical content knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate training CPD</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical framing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courses</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did these EYE define their ‘professional’ knowledge?</td>
<td>Perceptions of professionalism</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Curriculum and Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public perception</td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual needs and inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceptions of other educators</td>
<td></td>
<td>Maturation and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did they perceive to be the critical issues that affect their practice as</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2: A framework for presenting the main findings

The findings reveal insights into perceptions and practice in the early years regarding the educators’ knowledge domains, beliefs and practice, contributing to a model of early years professionalism. Further analysis of the findings formulated Table 3: ‘Model of Professionalism for an Early Years Educator’ generated from the seven dimensions of knowledge; education and training; skills; autonomy; values, ethics and reward.

| KNOWLEDGE | Systematic body of knowledge, as well as knowledge gained through experience  
Professional knowledge integrated with practical experience to develop expertise in the field  
Knowledge from varied theoretical premises  
Recognition of the knowledge of the expertise of the parties involved |
|---|---|
| EDUCATION | Qualifications gained through FE and HE and apprenticeship through working in the field, applying knowledge to practical experiences  
Appropriate training with regard to young children’s learning and development  
Training to deliver flexible curriculum and high level of pedagogic knowledge  
Self-directed continuing professional development to further develop knowledge and expertise |
| SKILLS | Well-developed complex multidisciplinary skills that encompass the demands of the role  
Effective teamwork, with different professionals, creating an inclusive ethos  
Ability to exercise significant judgments with regard to appropriate practice and skill exercised in new problems and situations  
Monitoring and evaluating effectiveness to inform practice and provision  
Effective communication of aims and expectations to the many and varied stakeholders  
Ability to critique, reflect and articulate understanding and application |
| AUTONOMY | Stronger voice in the shaping of relevant policy and practice  
Consulted as experts with recognition of professional knowledge and expertise  
Autonomy over professional responsibilities and recognition of professionalism, promoting status and value in the field  
Ability to exercise discretionary judgment regarding service  
Vocational aspects recognised and endorsed |
| VALUES | Sharing of a similar ideology based on appropriate knowledge, education and experience  
Beliefs in principles for appropriate provision that meets children’s and families’ needs  
Altruistic orientation through commitment to professional values and vocation built on moral and social purposes  
Public service and accountability to the community and client group of children and families  
Creating an environment of trust and mutual respect inherent in the professional role |
| ETHICS | Ethical principles and engaging with values consistent with the discipline  
High level of commitment to professional role and to the client group of parents, carers and children  
Commitment to collaborative and collective behaviour |
Table 3: A model of professionalism for early years educators

The follow-up study

The research examines whether the participants in this study had common critical issues that affected their professional thinking and practice. The initial data collection occurred from November 2000 to May 2002. It directly followed the introduction of the Foundation Stage and its Curriculum Guidance (QCA/DfES, 2000), commencing after more than a decade of educational change that had impacted on the early years of education. After an interval of approximately seven years, the follow-up research was conducted in 2007-2008 through semi-structured interviews and written responses to the ‘Model of Professionalism for an Early Years Educator’ derived from the findings in Phase 2 of the research. Nine of the original twelve sample EYEs participated in the research representing 75% of the total. They were interviewed at a location of their own choice: at their work place, on the university campus or at their home and one interviewee responded via email, as she moved to Texas. The interviews lasted one hour in duration and were conducted from November 2007 to February 2008 on a time scale of approximately one interview per week. Prior to the interviews, to ensure respondent validation, participants were sent:

1. A paper outlining the aims of objectives of the seeding bid research.
2. An ethics form in order that they could agree to their words being used in professional publications.

As in Phase 2 each participant was sent a full transcript of his/her interview and invited to comment on the accuracy of the transcript and to respond to any issues raised. As in the original study, a process of qualitative analysis preceded the assignment of codings to the interview transcripts, this time using MAXQDA 2007. Unfortunately the proposed focus group, the intention of which was to reflect on the model of professionalism, did not occur due to the geographical spread of the participants and the demands of their respective work schedules. Several of them had taken on different roles at their place of work or the setting had moved premises. In other cases they themselves had relocated or started a family. The model of professionalism was therefore posted and the participations’ observations were gained through individual meetings, phone conversations and email correspondence.

The three themes of professionalism; working relationships and curriculum and pedagogy were still evidenced in the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. Through returning to the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews as well as re-listening to the recordings, it was possible therefore to confirm whether the findings matched the key interests of the EYEs and verify the reliability of the codings assigned. The two members of the research team undertook individual analysis to verify the findings. The analysis of the findings of the EYEs’ issues contributed to a theory of their professionalism, which is now presented through a framework of the seven dimensions of knowledge; education and training; skills; autonomy; values, ethics and reward.

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1 MAXQDA 2007 is an updated version of WINMAX (1998) CAQDAS, which was used for assigning codes in the original study.
Seven Dimensions of the EYEs’ professionalism

Knowledge

One of the main criteria recognised in all the definitions of professionalism is the centrality of an established body of specialist knowledge, normally acquired through theoretical study, alongside or followed by, practical experience. Eraut (1994), Hargreaves (2001), Goodson and Numan (2002) all consider that theoretical professional knowledge and contextual practical knowledge need to be interlinked. The importance of both the professional knowledge and expertise in early years has been affirmed by Moyles et al. (2002); Sylva et al. (2002); Anning et al. (2008).

The EYEs’ understanding, judgment and insights, derived from their theoretical knowledge, contributed to the way they performed and articulated their practice:

I’ve learned so much more as I’ve gone through the last fifteen, twenty years, when I’ve looked at psychology and psychotherapy and it just confirms all the time that... those first few years are of crucial importance. (MWN)

This was further illustrated by NN1, who was excited about noticing aspects of the children’s development during her video-reflective-dialogue:

It was interesting to see it on the video, on the camera, I mean you read things like that in books when you are studying, that children will go through a stage and it’s nice to what you would think it would be. (NN1)

The EYEs had no problem demonstrating their pedagogical content knowledge and justified their practice through reflecting on the models of curriculum and pedagogy they believed were in tune with the children.

I started looking into Steiner and Froebel and of course that led me to Montessori. I have a very strong feeling that children need freedom to explore and play for longer than we allow them in the state system. (HIS)

MWN was passionate about High/Scope and argued that it was an excellent way of children managing their own work and play. She explained how her staff supported the two-year-olds ‘Plan, Do, Review’ describing the High/Scope curriculum as a:

Thinking person’s curriculum, an exciting approach, which is about making learning fun for children. (MWN)

HT1 reflected on how her setting integrated the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) with the Danish Forest School programme:

We were able to be involved in the Forest programme because we already knew the outdoors was important and it was in our development plan. (HT1)

The EYEs were developing varied pedagogical strategies to widen both staff and children’s experiences articulating theories that underpinned their practice. Professional knowledge gained through education and integrated with practical experience was strongly advocated by all the EYEs. They demonstrated their knowledge of psychological, ecological and socio-cultural theories reflecting on how young children develop and learn, the importance of the relationships between home, community and ECEC setting and the impact of policy.

Education and training

International evidence from Saracho and Spodek’s (2007) critical analysis of 40 USA studies suggests that the quality of the training, professional development and qualifications affect the quality of provision. UK Government funded evidence-based studies also indicate that a strong, well-trained and qualified workforce is important and that qualified early years teachers offer enormous benefits to children’s learning (Sylva et al. 2002; Moyles et al. 2002; Sylva et al, 2004). This was also HT1’s view:

...trained teachers are really important for quality education. The teachers take responsibility for the planning and are linked with nursery nurse’s key worker group to oversee that the teaching is OK. (HT1)
The EYE s strongly believed that appropriately trained and qualified practitioners are essential for everyone working with young children. Acquiring qualifications is an important element of their professionalism. They were a committed, well-qualified group, nine had qualified teacher status and three had nursery-nursing qualifications. Three of the EYE s had engaged in further training to move from secondary/primary education into ECEC. Having a family had promoted their interest and fascination in young children:

I’m teacher trained but it was having my own children that really made me want to work with early years... If I could be involved in high quality early years programmes that would offer children that sort of start in life, then that was where I wanted to be... (MWN)

Continuing professional development was also perceived to be crucial by all the respondents and the EYE s engaged in a whole range of informal and formal activities:

There’s a lot of further study going on and as they become interested in what we are doing they realise it’s just a means to the next thing and before I realise it I’ve got half the staff on training. It’s really interesting. (HT1).

I’ve been on plenty of courses to show that I’m trying to develop and not stagnating... The school is very committed to professional development. (NN2)

The EYE s reflected on what they had experienced through both education and training and they did not limit their professional development to just the achievement of competences. All engaged in professional development activities and many of them continued to gain further qualifications. They affirmed that they felt confident to articulate their knowledge and practice to parents, governors and OfSTED inspectors.

Skills

Within any profession there must be key skills that characterise the nature of the occupation, involving competence, efficacy, task complexity, communication and judgment. Educators require the skills to put knowledge into practice effectively and appropriately making continual decisions in all aspects of provision. Professionalism is related to proficiency and the EYE s reflected the complex ‘skills’ that go beyond the direct transmission of knowledge valued by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002). The complex skill of teaching, which involved planning, delivering, monitoring and assessing curriculum and pedagogy, was inherent in all the EYE s’ roles excepting MSS. All the EYE s evidenced aspects of managing, communicating and working with children and their families and in staff teams.

You can’t do the job without being skilled up. People don’t realise how multi-skilled and well qualified you need to be. (LHE)

A lot of roles actually, from being the building custodian right through to what they’re going to eat, what curriculum they’re doing. Responsibility for working with parents, developing staff, managing money, equipment, materials, building, people. Everything, we manage everything. (MWN)

Professionalism must also be recognised in everyday relationships with children, families and colleagues, as Manning-Morton (2006, 42) indicates these ‘demand high levels of physical, emotional and personal knowledge and skill’. Some of the EYE s were just beginning to work with different professionals in multidisciplinary teams.

Teamwork is important and no one is more important than another. We need everyone’s skills. Everyone needs to have ownership and be involved. (MSS)

We work well together, we’ve all got different skills, we integrate them quite well and the children benefit from that. (NN1)

Everybody is very clear about what his or her role is and I think that’s why the team works so well... But, I think we’ve got a great group of people, who all love doing what they’re doing. I’m very much one for finding people’s strengths and giving them as much time and resources as I can... There are a lot of issues and as people are on courses they are recognising a whole variety of interests. Where we have had the team around following a CAF, it has been good for the child and the family and it is good making the links. It is a good agenda but it takes time and it is about believing in it and the principles behind it to make it come into being. There is an enormous job to do. (HT1)

Across the sample the EYE s demonstrated a high level of organisational and interpersonal skills. They were committed to collaboration and teamwork with fellow practitioners. Although their teams might be at
different skill levels, they mostly seemed happy to learn from each other, disseminating key aspects of expertise through engaging in professional discussions. However there were several instances where the EYEs had felt pressured and challenged by colleagues, which will be explored in the section on values.

**Autonomy**

Most professions aim to have control over the entry requirement, self-regulation, standards and voice in policy. Prior to state mandated guidelines introduced across Europe, the ECEC curriculum had been ‘an area of professional autonomy’, with practitioners making the decisions about practice (Oberhuemer 2005, 12). Regulation and control through a ‘constant surveillance… for normalised practice’, resulted in ECEC practitioners’ lacking a unified belief in themselves as a professional group (Osgood 2006a, 7). The pilot study [phase 1] undertaken in 2000 revealed that the respondents believed their autonomy was being eroded and their professional knowledge questioned (Brock 2003). However this was not case in 2001-2002 when these EYEs believed there was now recognition and understanding of their professional practice.

*Things never stand still, you need to be able to cope with change so that the children are getting the best. If people are being challenged and moving forward in ideas, then it’s better for the children.* (HT1)

These EYEs believed that recent government initiatives were focused on ECEC provision. They perceived that they had more of a voice in the shaping of relevant early years policy and were able to be more autonomous than their primary counterparts. The EYEs were promoting a play-based pedagogy and felt confident in their provision:

*I just feel I’ve got much more range to do learning through play and am more confident in my teaching and what I’m doing is right. They children seem to enjoy it so much more because they’re learning all the time, yet they just think they’re playing.* (RT1)

All in all the EYEs were a committed group who were able to justify their practice, however, public perception of professionalism and status were areas of concern. Many of the EYEs believed that there was generally a lack of understanding about ECEC:

*I think we don’t explain to parents enough exactly what the value is of the activities that we’re doing. I think that’s partly our fault and partly a misunderstanding of early years.* (RT2)

The EYEs were reflective and articulate, professional in the way voiced their issues, stating they appreciated the forum of the research. In the past EYEs have been accused of not being articulate or assertive enough in justifying and promoting their beliefs and ideologies (Anning 2002). However, these EYEs were a competent sample who had been recommended by advisers and educators in the field used to justifying provision to a range of audiences.

**Values**

Professionals form values and beliefs through study and practical experience, which may incorporate altruism, dedication and service to clients. During the last 30 years the ECEC profession have experienced a range of prescriptive frameworks, which have caused some educators to feel destabilised and so question their beliefs and values. The way the curriculum is understood is linked to educators’ constructions of their personal and professional identities, as they develop a practice that is their own (Campbell et al., 2004). Three of the EYEs working with children of reception age had had times when they had struggled to preserve their professional identity, when their professional knowledge and practice were challenged by key stage 1 teachers.

*There is pressure from up there to down here to get them at a certain level ready for what they’ve got to do in Key Stage 1, which I can understand, but it’s the approach to how they learn which I think we need to discuss.* (RT1)

*The transition is so huge for these children. At the moment there’s like a wall between us, we’re protecting what we’ve got and what we believe should happen to the children and I suppose on their side they’re protecting what should happen for National Curriculum.* (FSTs)

Because personal and professional identity, beliefs and values are so bound together for educators, self-esteem can be affected (Nias 1989; Clandinin and Connelly 1995; Hargreaves 2002). This is particularly so...
if ideologies are challenged and this seemed to be the case for the FSTs. The pressures they had felt through a constrained working relationship with a colleague had nearly meant them leaving early years - they had been ‘buying extra lottery tickets’ because it ‘was that bad’. These situations were perhaps not that unusual - Phase 1 and 2 of the research - and that many EYEs nationally might have been experiencing similar challenges (Garrick & Chilvers 2003). SATs had an impact on early years provision and whilst pedagogy of play was acknowledged through the introduction of the CGFS, but this had not yet been recognised by all headteachers and teachers.

The introduction of the Foundation Stage and its Curriculum Guidance (QCA and DfES, 2000) with a focus on children at the centre of the educational process is deemed to have been positive by the EYEs. This corresponds to Keating et al’s (2002) research, which find its introduction resolves many of the conflicts of teachers of young children through re-affirming a play-based pedagogy. The CGFS seems to have been ‘a major step towards the professionalisation, and potentially enhanced status’ of early years teachers (Hargreaves and Hopper 2006, 181). However there seems to have been more appreciation of the CGFS and the Foundation Stage Curriculum introduced in 2008 by the practitioners than by the lecturers who expressed reservations about a prescribed curriculum for young children. In Phase 4 a few of the sample indicated concerns about ECEC.

I think a lot of money has been spent in Early Years and it is quite interesting because some of the worries I had about it becoming politically visible seem to have been well founded. It is fascinating from my point of view, having a young baby now, I am still quite astonished really about the cost and the quality of early years care and education. Thinking about all the promises that were made particularly in the 1997 election. This idea of making child care better and more available and when I’ve been going round places trying to get a place for my baby, it strikes me that all the recommendations that I have read about for years – Plowden from 1933, from 1908 we still don’t have that nursery education available and that’s quite astounding me. In some ways, a lot has happened and in some ways, a lot has stayed exactly the same. (LHE)

The values of each EYE were portrayed strongly throughout the data collection, as what they believed in was drawn from each of the seven dimensions of professionalism. Their beliefs and therefore their professional identities is founded upon their knowledge, education and training, skills and experience, policy development and ability to be autonomous, ethical understandings and the rewards and commitment to the job in hand.

**Ethics**

Ethics is a complex concept referring to codes of conduct, moral integrity, confidentiality, commitment, trustworthiness and responsibility. A professional’s ethical practice should ‘foreground active personal responsibility’ when making decisions and forming ethical relationships (Dahlberg & Moss 2005:12). A commitment to a clear, shared emotional and intellectual understanding of the complexity of ethics is therefore important for any contemporary professional. Those who work in ECEC may have strong personal and emotional values when they feel they are acting in the best interests of children (Rodd, 2004). However, there is not a national professional ethical code for ECEC in England. Ethics is difficult to locate in the documentation for the General Teaching Council (GTC); the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) and the Teacher Development Agency (TDA).

Ethics is more tacitly than explicitly addressed by the EYEs. The lecturers directly raised the ethical issues more than the practitioners who are involved in every day aspects of ethics. The EYEs’ professionalism, professional knowledge and working relationships were situated within the immediate contexts of settings, influenced by both sociocultural dimensions within local communities. They reflected on the tensions between education and care, the impacts of politics, socio-economics and related ethical implications. Several of the EYEs had strong views about the appropriateness of provision for young children’s care and educational experiences, when government and local policy affected choice, quality and transition:

> There is a fantastic community and parent links but no boundaries. Confidentiality does not exist because people go out drinking with the people whose children they are working with... Very few people are living a straightforward life from this setting. In terms of what values are brought into parenting and working with young children, social conditions are so different that it really makes you question your values and about what is quality, what is achievable, what aspirations are
realistic and what is the government thinking in terms of strategy of people now working with the children and parents going out to work. They are always in debt. They are always down on the childcare fees. The family tax credit has been spent on something else. Yet, as a practitioner, I think I have had an impact... We have all experienced a lot of tensions and we have all had to find ways to get people on board and try and listen to them and value them without patronising them. (LFE)

LFE’s observations on social exclusion mirrored Clarke’s (2006) and Moss’s (2006) concerns about state intervention at family level that may not address complex problems and underlying issues. In contrast, HT1 was positive about the new government strategies and welcomed funding that targeted families where children needed most help:

It is a challenge for the authority.. because Dewsbury is where the bombers came from and there is a lot of talk. The children will come back and talk about it and draw pictures about it, even very young children are thinking about such things. So building up good relationships with people from different backgrounds is important to us as well and not just the young children but their families so that they are coming together and seeing that they have the same concerns for their children. They all want a better world for their children; they have aspirations for their children. So it is that that we home in on... I don’t think there has ever been such a time in Early Years where so much has been going on. You are being challenged at all angles. (HT1)

The EYEs shared a common purpose, standards and ethics in their work, even though they may have had different positions, responsibilities qualifications and length of experience. They all had a strong ethic of care and responsibility towards the children and families they worked with and each year brought new challenges and difficult ethical issues to contend with in their professional roles.

**Reward**

The rewards of being a professional include gaining influence, social status, power, salary, sense of vocation and enjoyment of work. Block (2008) believes that determining the key satisfactions of the teaching profession is important for retention. Bullough & Pinnegar (2009) argue that ‘eudaimonia sustains teachers’ and that it is in ‘moments of happiness, of loving and being loved’, that educators (throughout early years to higher education) find the most value in their personal and professional lives. Furthermore, as Hargreaves and Hopper’s (2006) findings indicate educators of young children have huge job satisfaction and really enjoy their work. There was definitely a wealth of evidence from the EYEs that demonstrated these rewards of personal satisfaction and enjoyment of working with young children. It is difficult to relay the enthusiasm, enjoyment and interest in their work:

It’s what drives me along, keeps me turning up every day. (MSS)

I enjoy my work, I really do. I'm passionate about what I do. I am and I always have been. I believe so strongly about what I do, about children in this age range. (MWN)

Yes it’s still challenging, that’s why I’m here. When it stops being challenging I’ll leave. (NN1)

Many of the EYEs were passionate about ‘the benefits and joys of teaching’ (LFE). They demonstrated an ‘innate love for it’ (LHE) as that’s ‘what’s wonderful about the job is that you’re taking the lid off this wonderful world’ (HT1). They indicated that vocation, passion and enthusiasm were inherent in most ECEC professionals:

That’s traditional of EY people, people I worked with in the PPA had been some of the most passionate people you could get, but I think EY people are normally passionate, imaginative and are willing to give and give and give of their time and energy and expertise to the children. (MWN)

Edgington (2004) suggests that those who have been involved in ECEC for some time talk enthusiastically about the dynamic nature of teaching young children and the relationships they had developed with families and communities. There was indeed almost a competition regarding the value of these relationships in the focus group:

It’s good to talk about the children. We get to know them very well. (RT2)

Keeping children for five terms meant you get to know them as people. (LHE)

Imagine what it’s like for us in private day-care with children 0-5 for four and a half years. (MWN)
Only two of the respondents (both male) stated that they were dissatisfied with their salary, but several had issues about their level of status within both the public and with educators of older children. All of the sample appreciated close contact and their enjoyment of the relationships they formed with young children and their families permeated their discourse. Their commitment was not only inherent in their personal satisfaction, but should be recognised as a key element of their professionalism.

Validity of the seven dimensions

As stated earlier in this paper, the literature search across the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and education revealed the seven common traits of professionalism. These seven dimensions were also organically generated through the analysis of the data from the first four research phases and these are now being trialled in phase 5. As Mishler (1990, 420) argues a perspective of validity where truths are 'embedded in complex networks of concepts, linguistic and technical practices... meaning and interpretation are fundamental to the extent that ‘we can rely on the concepts, methods and inferences of a study as the basis of our own theorising and research’. The objectivity of the researcher is important - it may be difficult to be totally non-judgmental, as values and personal knowledge must be inherent in any analysis, but the advantage of relevant professional knowledge-base is that it supports understanding and analysis of what respondents offer. This research aims to have employed Mishler’s ‘trustworthy’ analysis of the data through ‘honest’ perceptions of respondents’ knowledge and values and cross confirmation of the dimensions through different frameworks. Models should be applied not prescribed, therefore the model of professionalism is being trialled and critiqued by a wider interdisciplinary professionals in ECEC.

Concluding remarks

The importance of this research is that it contributes to a model of professionalism for EYE (Table 2) formulated from the analysis of their critical issues. The significance of this model is that it establishes a construction of professionalism that acknowledges the complexity of the work and the interconnections across the different domains in the field of ECEC. The model provides a starting point to heighten awareness and establish a discourse of what professionalism entails.

This study responds to Cameron’s (2006, 68) demand for an extended definition of professionalism to ‘include the scope and quality of practice, the experiences and views of male and female workers’. It determines the ‘hidden qualities and dimensions of our professional practice’ ‘to improve our way of being professional’ as requested by Osgood (2006b, 194). It provides, in a small way, a clear need for a research agenda exploring issues of professional roles and identity’. It is important for early years professionals to have a voice in shaping policy with their expertise and knowledge sought and respected.

Some years ago Katz (1988, 214) argued for ‘members of the early childhood community to join forces and bargain for an agreement appertaining to the principles of professional practice for the field’. Yet in England, there are still divisions between ECEC professionals because of the different titles, qualifications and expectations of roles denoted by national standards and competencies. As Campbell (2003, 243) indicates the time is right for a ‘re-conceptualisation of professionalism in the context of the early years and it is time to begin to redefine the roles of teachers and other professionals’. This empirical research responds to this demand. The model of professionalism could provide a cohesiveness of professionalism across the ECEC domains. This was requested by Osgood (2006b) who advocates that early years practitioners need to engage in the discourse of establishing a construction of professionalism.

The model of professionalism provides a starting point to heighten awareness of professionalism and what professionalism in the field of ECEC - a ‘joined up professionalism’ could give this professional body an identity. Continuing professional development is essential for practitioners who have to continually respond to the ever-changing social context. The model of professionalism has already been used for personal, professional, reflective practice with Masters students on courses of Childhood and Early Years. It has been reviewed by lecturers, practitioners with early years professional status and childhood and early years students accessing the reflection page on website for TACTYC (Trainers and Cooperating Teachers of Young Children) professional association website. The model is now being trialled with lecturers at
Leeds Metropolitan University with professionals in the fields of health, social work, speech and language therapy and librarianship. Berry (2009) believes that the development of a shared knowledge base to be more problematic for teachers than for other professionals, yet the respondents in phases 2 and 4 demonstrate a generic knowledge base as seen in Table 3. However, the challenges will be much greater in examining the commonalities and difference of the knowledge bases and values of the different professionals working with young children. This will not only be an interesting and challenging exercise, but aims to be beneficial for future working partnerships in the interdisciplinary team.

References


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