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Professionalising the early childhood workforce in England: work in progress
or missed opportunity?

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The authors confirm that this article is original and has not been published or submitted elsewhere.

Professionalising the early childhood workforce in England: work in progress or missed opportunity?

Abstract

This paper considers policies and strategies employed to professionalise the early childhood workforce in England since the Labour government took office in 1997. The term professionalisation is associated here with moves towards creating a graduate early years workforce, which could have implications for training, pay and employment conditions, the specific body of knowledge and the professional identity of early years practitioners. The new status of Early Years Professional is explored, which has its legal underpinning in the 2006 Childcare Act. The discussion is informed empirically by the views of a small sample of practitioners training as Early Years Professionals. It is argued that the concept of professionalism applied here does not meet the criteria employed within sociological theories of the professions. It also contrasts with that of other professions working with young children, such as qualified teachers and social workers. Finally, it conflicts with early years practitioners' own views on their professional identity. This process could therefore be regarded as representing a missed opportunity in professionalising the role of early years practitioners in England, but instead it is viewed as a work in progress, in the light of evidence for early years practitioners' professional attitudes and commitment.

Background

This paper considers policies and strategies employed to professionalise the early childhood workforce in England since the Labour government took office in 1997. The term professionalisation is associated here with moves towards creating a graduate early years workforce. This may have implications for training, pay and employment conditions, the specific body of knowledge and the professional identity of the early years practitioners who are the target of these developments. Early years practitioners make up only part of this workforce [1] alongside teachers and social care professionals. In recent years great efforts have gone into this process of professionalisation. Yet the British Government has neither fully defined the notion of the early years professionalism being progressed here, nor paid sufficient attention to the possible implications of the historical routes along which different types of practice in working with young children emerged (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009). Consequently, the historical, practical and philosophical divide that exists between early childhood care and education appears to have been strengthened rather than resolved by this development.

After a general introduction to the recent history of early childhood workforce issues in England, locating these within a theoretical framework, this paper's focus shifts to the exploration of a newly created 'status' for early childhood practitioners, obtainable to those with a degree level qualification (McGillivray, 2008). The status of Early Years Professional [2] has its legal underpinning in the 2006 Childcare Act. The discussion in this paper is informed empirically by the views of a small sample of practitioners training as Early Years Professionals. It will be argued that the meaning of professionalism as used in this context does not meet the criteria employed within sociological theory or match that used in relation to other professions working with young children, such as qualified teachers and social workers. Moreover, it appears to conflict with early years practitioners' own views on their professional identity. Therefore this development may represent a missed opportunity in progressing the professionalisation of the role of early years practitioners in England.

The conceptualisation of professionalism within sociological theories of the professions, owes much to the work of Max Weber (1978). In his view, professions as competing interest groups are typical of the conflicts inherent in society as a whole. Pursuing this line of argument, subsequent theorists have demonstrated how monopolisation of specific and exclusive knowledge and skills, group member solidarity, restricting access to learning opportunities and requiring accreditation to practice, continue to be employed in the maintenance of professions and professionalism. However, these can only be achieved with support and cooperation from governments, educational institutions, other professions and the public (Macdonald, 1995). Paradoxically, altruism, integrity and long-term professional commitment may also flourish within the context of monopolistic strategies, as the threat of competition diminishes. Finally, the restrictions on access to the professions and strong group identities help position professionals favourably in relation to negotiating enhanced pay and employment conditions (Freidson, 1994).

Such a traditional and power-based sociology of the professions approach may overlook disempowering dynamics inherent in professionalisation practices. Given that the characteristics associated here with professional status can be viewed at least as prerequisites for professional practice and leadership, we nevertheless consider it apt in the present context.

The increasing professionalisation of early childhood practitioners and the meaning of the notion of professionalism in this context, is being contested by several European academic writers. (Moss, 2008; Oberhuemer, 2008). Urban (2008) notes the emergence of:

... contradictory debates on the early years profession that have gained new prominence in many countries in recent years.

(Urban, 2008: 136)

Thoughtfully questioning the link being assumed by policy makers between a particular model of professionalisation and the achievement of quality targets, he takes the side of those, like Dahlberg et al (2007), who believe that:

...too often the language of 'quality' is employed to legitimise the proliferating maze of regulations in early childhood education and care, and to undermine instead of support professional autonomy.

(Urban, 2008: 138)

Arguably, though, an implicit assumption is made here as to a definition of professionalism capable of being contrasted with alternative approaches. In contrast, in the present paper we merely test the prevailing definition of professionalism as used in the construction of 'early years professional status' in England against the criteria developed originally within the sociology of the professions. In order to develop this argument, we first need to illustrate where early years practitioners did and do fit within the wider early years workforce.

Traditional divides within the early years workforce in England

Traditionally, England's early childhood education and care system has featured divides between early childhood education, childcare for the children of employed parents and childcare delivered as part of child welfare services. Until the reforms instigated by the Labour Government after 1997 (Lloyd, 2008), these divides were not only reflected in administrative responsibilities at central and local government level, underpinned by separate types of legislation, but also within the early childhood workforce itself. Moreover, early childhood care and education services were split between services for children aged 3 to 5 and for those aged under 3 (Moss and Penn, 1996; Cohen et al, 2004).

Early childhood teachers qualified to degree level were in charge of the delivery of early childhood education in state funded and sometimes in private for-profit and not-for profit nursery school and classes to children aged 3 to 5, while a range of predominantly unqualified early childhood practitioners were either employed in childcare facilities in state funded, private and community day nurseries or as childminders provided family-based aimed at younger children childcare (Mooney et al, 2001). An interesting discourse analysis by McGillivray (2008: 252) reveals the absence until recently of an established

job title which clearly identified the role and nature of these diverse early years practitioners working in England and illustrating who is an early years professional. Oberhuemer's (2008: 137) observation that in EU countries operating split early years education and care systems, education professionals tend to be more highly valued than other types of childcare practitioners is illuminating in this context.

Social workers took a lead in child welfare services for young children and their families, which also employed a range of family support workers (Tunstall et al, 2007). Some so-called integrated settings combined all three strands of early childhood provision and a variety of early childhood worker types (Penn, 2000). Since the early sixties, parent-led part-time playgroups, staffed largely by parent volunteers, had formed another distinctive component of the English early childhood service system (Lloyd et al, 1989; Statham et al, 1990).

Despite the diversity of early childhood provision and variety within the early childhood workforce, until the late 90s parents and children were not offered a real choice of provision, as distribution and prevalence were locally determined (Penn and Randall, 2005), with early childhood provision traditionally more common in Labour local authorities and reflecting social stratification (Moss et al, 2000).

In England early years workforce policy and its status for a long time echoed public attitudes towards the role of early years practitioners. Having been socially constructed as being primarily about 'minding' or 'caring', in contrast with the role of early years teachers (Hevey and Curtis, 1996; McGillivray, 2008; Miller, 2008), this role only gradually came to be perceived as skilled and responsible, notably after the introduction of the Children Act 1989. Although collaborations between the different types of practitioners within and across a variety of early childhood settings would be referred to as multi-professional interactions (David, 1994; Anning et al, 2006), a gap in professionalism arguably continues in respect of the early years practitioners in such multi-professional collaborations. After all, their position failed to meet criteria such as graduate status, accreditation by a professional body and formal pay structures. The whole situation surrounding the early childcare care and education system and those working within it underwent

considerable change though, when in 1997 a Labour government took over after 18 years of Conservative rule.

The New Labour Government's National Childcare Strategy (DfEE, 1998) addressed inequalities of access, although Ball and Vincent (2005) illustrate the failure of such policies to eliminate the social stratification of childcare and early education. The strategy ushered in genuine administrative changes at central and local government level, and also encouraged greater coordination between the three strands of early childhood provision (Pugh, 2006). For the first time, a universal entitlement to two years of part-time publicly funded early education for 3 and 4 year olds was introduced (Cohen et al, 2004). By 2004 the implementation of this policy was complete and since 2007 part-time early education has also been provided for targeted two year olds living in disadvantaged areas (Smith et al, forthcoming).

Characteristic of this provision is an emphasis defined by OECD as preparation for school, in contrast with a social pedagogical approach oriented towards support for children's wider development within the context of their families (OECD, 2009). Notably, though, a setting's receipt of early education grants has been tied to the delivery of a prescribed early years curriculum by a range of early years practitioners, rather than to the status of the practitioners delivering it, so the role of acknowledged education professionals, for instance qualified early years teachers, has not been extended as part of these developments (Devereux and Cable, 2008).

Early years workforce issues featured prominently on the Labour Government's early years policy agenda and the inter-connectedness between teaching and early childhood practice in particular was emphasised in policy documents. Nevertheless, in the National Childcare Strategy the institutional and conceptual divide between the early childhood teacher and practitioner was maintained, inherited as it was from previous administrations going back to the 19th century (Moss, 2007). This fact alone provides sufficient grounds to posit that the attempted professionalisation of the early years workforce in England since 1997 cannot be defined as a true reconceptualisation.

Early childhood education and child welfare services remain predominantly staffed by practitioners and managers neither qualified to

degree level nor licensed to practice by a professional body, i.e. not members of a professional workforce as defined above. Some analysts, therefore, remain of the view that none of these developments opened up new possibilities for rethinking the early childhood system as a whole or reconceptualising the early childhood education and care workforce (Moss, 2003; Penn, 2007). We now locate recent developments in professionalising the early years workforce within their wider post-1997 policy context.

The early years workforce in England under New Labour

The most recent moves towards the professionalisation of the English early years workforce, including the creation of the status of Early Years Professional, are taking place against a background of related developments. Seen from an outsider perspective, this approach towards professionalisation is bound to come across as complex and fragmented, but even for British observers its highly technical nature, the limited innovation it represents and its opaque policy rationale remains problematic (Moss, 2008).

The simplification of the existing early years training framework was first tackled in 1997 under the first Labour administration and supported by a range of funding initiatives (Owen, 2006). No targets for up-skilling the workforce were introduced at this stage, however, and neither was the discourse surrounding professionalisation of early years practitioners evident as yet. Most importantly, financial support for training remained patchy and additional qualifications were not reflected in pay and employment conditions.

Miller (2008a) provides a useful reminder of previous attempts at professionalising the sector. Under New Labour, professionalisation through graduate status in the early years was initially encouraged by means of the Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation degree. This introduced a new employment status, Senior Practitioner, which the Government intended to enable practitioners to be valued as professionals and gain recognition for their achievements (DfES, 2002). By 2007 over 360 students had qualified as 'Senior Practitioner' after obtaining this degree, making it the most frequently gained among all Foundation Degrees. But their role and subsequent career path remained ill defined (O'Keefe and Tait, 2004), while many felt let down

by unfulfilled professional recognition (Hallet, 2008). As will be argued below, the Senior Practitioner's role was reconceptualised and replaced by the new status of Early Years Professional.

According to Calder (2008), lack of transparency also characterises the contribution made to professionalising the early years workforce by means of the UK's Early Childhood Studies undergraduate and postgraduate university degrees, which have been developed since the early 90s. The challenges anticipated and experienced by such students in constructing their professional identity have been well illustrated by Jones (2008) and by Adams (2008) in a Scottish context.

Active moves towards professionalising the early years workforce were reinforced by a much wider initiative informed by the *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) policy agenda, legally underpinned by the Children Act 2004 (HM Government, 2004). Following a major child abuse inquiry in which inadequate inter-professional working had been identified (Laming, 2003), this agenda initiated substantial reforms in delivering children's services. This reform programme entailed a restructuring of the six categories of practitioners comprising the children's workforce as a whole and reconceptualising cross-sectoral relationships with a view to improving outcomes for all children and young people (Deakin and Kelly, 2006). The discussion of this wider children's workforce framework within which changes to the early years workforce are taking place falls outside the remit of this paper, therefore we will concentrate here on the practical steps taken to effect the latter's professionalisation under three Labour administrations.

Following the case made in the 2003 Laming Inquiry for the skilling up of all parts of the children's workforce to encourage successful multi-professional collaboration, the 10-Year Strategy for Childcare (HM Treasury et al, 2004) unveiled plans for the promotion of early years workforce training, qualifications, skills and competence (Owen and Haynes, 2008). Explicit targets for the professionalisation of the early years workforce in England were only formulated during the third Labour administration, with the publication of the Children's Workforce Strategy consultation document (HM Government, 2005), the Government's response to this (DfES, 2006a) and

the plans for an associated integrated qualifications framework for the children's workforce as a whole to be implemented in 2010 (DfES, 2006b).

Recognising the need for public investment to realise the proposed changes, the Government in 2006 introduced the Transformation Fund, now the Graduate Leadership Fund, explicitly designed to allow the employment of a graduate early years practitioner or early years teacher in each group childcare setting. In the same year the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2006) announced plans for 70% of the early years workforce to be qualified to vocational training level 3 by 2010. Himmelweit and Land (2007) acknowledge that training for the early years workforce has received more short-term funding than other parts of the social care workforce, but they also point out that staff turnover and early years setting closure rates may undo any of its longer-term beneficial effects.

The 10-Year Strategy for Childcare reflects the Government's position on the professionalisation of the early years workforce. This has been reiterated at least three times: in the 2007 policy review of children's services (DSCF, 2007), in the latest review of the children's workforce change programme (DCSF, 2008b) and in the second major review of the national childcare strategy (HM Government, 2009). This professionalisation is being realised through a very gradual transformation into a graduate workforce.

The key role envisaged within such a workforce is that of a graduate Early Years Professional (EYP), a status which was initially described as equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status, though this interpretation would be consistently contested by teaching unions. In this role, an EYP is expected to act as a 'change agent' to improve practice only in settings within the private, voluntary and independent sector, but not in maintained schools (CWDC, 2008c). The choice as to whether to implement a professionalisation of the entire early years workforce by the introduction of this status as opposed to professionalising only the leadership in early years settings, obviously made for a serious policy challenge. The latter strategy has won the day thus far, as we shall see in the next section of this paper.

The status and role of the new Early Years Professional

Present Government targets include having an Early Years Professional in every full daycare setting by 2015 and in Children's Centres as early as in 2010 (CWDC, 2008), with two graduates in settings in disadvantaged areas. As yet no longer-term targets for the professionalisation of the remainder of the early years workforce, apart from its leaders, have been set. Who are the practitioners who are candidates for this new status and how is it attained?

It would appear that the Senior Practitioner's role described above has been re-thought and replaced by the nationally recognised award of early Years Professional Status, which provides a career progression route from the Early Years Foundation Degree to graduate professional status. The standardised training is funded for practitioners providing full and sessional day care in private-for-profit and private-not-for-profit early years settings and within Children's Centres (NAO, 2006), but not for practitioners working in maintained, i.e. publicly funded, schools. The creation of this new status is thus explicitly aimed at professionalising the private early years sector and by implication raising its service quality.

In the light of previous experience with the Senior Practitioner role, the EYP role must not only be credible, but also capable of being embedded within the early years sector, particularly as many Foundation degree graduates with Senior Practitioner Status are undertaking the EYPS Long Extended Professional Development Pathway. This pathway is one of four separate part-time and full-time vocational training pathways towards gaining EYP status, which have been in operation since 2006, fully funded by the Children's Workforce Development Council. Two alternative routes are being piloted at the time of writing. For the full-time pathway, candidates can be graduates in any subject and no prior experience or knowledge of work with young children is required. Admission to different pathways, some work-based, depends on levels of prior training and experience.

To attain EYP status, candidates must satisfy their assessors that they can meet 39 predetermined standards, organised into six separate sets. These sets cover the following areas: knowledge and understanding; effective practice; relationships with children; communicating and working in partnership with families and carers; teamwork and collaboration and professional development (CWDC, 2008b). It falls outside the scope of this

paper to question why learning domains concerned with creativity, dance, drama, music etc are excluded, when the notion of education is inextricably linked to broadening of learning opportunities and insights.

Early Years Professionals are expected to take a lead role in delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage, the statutory programme for children from birth to 5 years in all types of registered early years settings. This programme was introduced in the Childcare Act 2006 and has been rolled out since September 2008 (DCSF, 2008a).

At the time of writing, in early summer 2009, some 35 training providers, mostly universities working in partnership with employers, have helped just over 3000 graduates achieve the early Years Professional status. The Early Years Professional is intended to be a 'change agent' whose achievements are meant to result in raised standards in early years settings (Miller, 2008a: 23). Being a professional leader within the early years sector is an emerging concept, explicitly connected with raising standards (Jones and Pound, 2008).

Research is yet to demonstrate that this new role is having an impact on quality of provision and children's outcomes, but the very assumption of a simple linear relationship between workforce reform and service user outcomes is problematic. In a discussion of the complex interaction between structural and process factors influencing quality in early childhood education and care provision, Leseman (2009) identifies staff qualifications as only one such factor, and unlikely to have a major impact on their own. In a review for CWDC of the evidence for the effectiveness of workforce reform, Broadhead et al (2008: 10) note that:

It is clear that whilst we have an emerging and growing knowledge of processes, particularly in terms of new forms of multi-disciplinary working, we need to know much more about outcomes and impact. The major challenge for future research is to explore how workforce reform links to outcomes and impact and to provide an assessment of concrete outcomes for service users and clients.

Academic analyses of these developments highlight the confusion arising from the EYP role in relation to what constitutes professionalism (Miller, 2008a: 28), the prevalence of continuing support for a non-graduate pathway into the profession (Owen and Hayes, 2008: 12) and evidence that increasing regulation and prescription may undermine rather than promote early years professionalism and turn practitioners into ‘technicians’ delivering a set of national standards (Osgood, 2006). Moss (2008) strongly puts the case for a professionalisation of the entire early years workforce, not just its leadership, as part of a ‘democratic professionalism’ in which early years professionals are no longer set apart from teachers.

Other early childhood research does positively relate early childhood practitioner training and qualifications to children’s outcomes. Both the OECD survey of early childhood education and care systems in 20 member countries (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006) and a major longitudinal study of the relationship between the quality of provision and children’s later educational progress (Sylva et al, 2004), drew attention to the effect of practitioner qualifications on early years service quality and children’s outcomes. Indeed Sylva and her colleagues recommended an enhanced role for teachers in early years settings on the basis of their findings. Such recommendations appear to have been ignored in the plethora of policy documents describing moves towards professionalising the early years workforce in England

Denied the status of qualification, the new status of Early Years Professional (EYP) has been positioned almost in opposition to existing qualifications, such as that of early years teacher or children and families social worker. Thus it reflects the Labour government’s decision not to increase the number of qualified teachers in leadership positions in settings for children from birth to age 5. Neither has the European model of the pedagogue been selected as a format for promotion (Oberhuemer, 2005). It would be difficult to argue that the professionalism criteria of ‘monopolisation of specific and exclusive knowledge and skills’ or that of ‘requiring accreditation to practice’ previously identified by theorists of professionalism, is fully met by early years practitioners currently working as EYPs in early years settings.

If we return to the criteria for professionalism outlined in the first section of the present paper, some other dimensions traditionally associated with increasing professionalisation and enjoyed by the teaching profession, such as professional accreditation and nationally determined pay and employment conditions, do not appear to form part of this early years professionalisation process either. Miller (2008b: 266) concludes that

...the diverse roles and responsibilities of early years practitioners, the variety of settings they work in, and the lack of a professional registration body and formal pay structures make it difficult to agree what constitutes an early years professional in the English context.

Owen and Haynes (2008: 17) highlight interesting evidence from early Government documents for the view that skills and fairly should be rewarded in, but recognise that:

...references to pay and rewards are absent in later documents, and it appears that government is moving away from a commitment to review pay, conditions and rewards, at least in the short term.

Halfway through the 10-Year Strategy for Childcare period, the Government's recently published review of the strategy (HM Government, 2009), does not offer concrete proposals in this respect either. Three points relating to quality of provision stand out in particular by virtue of their tentative nature and the likelihood that they will not be realised under prevailing economic and political conditions. These are, that the government, working with partners, will:

- ensure that everyone working in early years provision has a full and relevant qualification of at least level three (equivalent to A-level) and consider making this a requirement from 2015;
- consider making it a legal requirement that every full daycare setting has a graduate from 2015;

- develop career pathways and reward commitment and excellence across the workforce.

(HM Government, 2009: 8)

Childcare advocacy agency Daycare Trust (2008) has argued in a position paper developed with TUC support, that failing to improve pay and conditions for the early years workforce may jeopardise other initiatives aimed at raising quality and qualifications. Such improvements were also urgently demanded in a recent survey of EYPs by a UK union (Willis, 2009), which will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Meanwhile, a national vocational qualification at level 3 remains the highest qualification level legally required of managers of registered early years group settings (DCSF, 2008). The 2007 early years provider survey (Nicholson et al, 2008) confirms that while 64% of early years practitioners are now qualified to this level across the early years workforce and across all settings as a whole, only 11 % of this workforce are qualified to level 6 or above, i.e. that of EYPs and qualified teachers. In contrast, in full day care provided in Children's Centres and in nursery schools, around 80% of staff hold at least a Level 3 qualification. So to what extent does the position of EYPs working within this framework match the remaining criteria for professionalism listed in the first section of this paper, namely group member solidarity and professional identity?

We now turn to listen to newly qualified EYPs and those in training, as their views are essential to gaining an insider perspective on EYP professional identity, including their sense of belonging to a well-defined professional group.

The views of Early Years Professionals

Given that the first graduates to acquire EYP status did so only in 2007, it is perhaps not surprising that their views and experiences have not yet been widely explored. What does it mean to be an EYP, to demonstrate professionalism, to promote the professionalisation of a sector that has been historically regarded as low status, due to the female gendered workforce and

their associated role of caring for children (Kay, 2005)? Professionalism in the early years is complex, and has been likened to a ball of knotted string. In order to untangle and understand the concept of professionalism within the sector, all the knots of professionalism should be untangled; these include issues around gender, women's cultural and socialisation role in society and an understanding of leadership (Friedman, 2007), access to specialised training and a specialised body of knowledge.

In view of the lack of research to date focusing on EYP views on their professional experiences, we offer two contrasting sources of information here. The first source consists of qualitative data collected by one of the present paper's authors (EH) to gain an insight into practitioner attitudes towards professionalisation of early years practitioners. The second source is a recent trade union survey of 300 EYPS and those on EYP training pathways (Willis, 2009), where qualified EYPs constituted 70% of the respondents.

Through small discussion groups Hallet explored the views of 20 EYPS candidates on the EYPS Long Extended Professional Development Pathway at a training provider in the Midlands region. All candidates were women EYSE Foundation Degree graduates, experienced women practitioners working as nursery nurses, family support workers, day-nursery managers or Children's Centre managers. Four themes extracted from literature of the topic provided the focus for the discussion: professionalisation of the workforce, professional identity, professional attributes and belonging to a professional group. Participants contributed particular words they associated with the four themes and through the discussion a collective view emerged (Marinker, 2006; Yin, 2003) of diverse aspects of the developing concept of early years professionalism.

These EYPS candidates viewed the professionalisation of the workforce at two levels, firstly, they recognised the national agenda of raising its status and quality through higher qualifications with a view to raising the quality of provision and ultimately to improve outcomes for children. Secondly, at a personal level, they viewed it as 'being valued' within the workforce, achieving a personal goal of gaining a 'qualification' with related pay and conditions. Though the latter expectation may not be realised, as we shall see. Referring to the 39 EYPS standards they were expected to meet in their

everyday work in order to qualify for conferment of the EYPS status, they felt their work with young children and families was valued.

Mostly positive personal and professional components to their own identity were mentioned: 'confidence,' 'empowerment,' 'pride' and 'passion,' 'respect' as personal components, 'improved status,' 'a title,' 'a qualification,' 'role,' 'behaviour', 'recognition', as professional components of their individual identity as an aspiring EYP. Their views reflected a personal and professional confidence and an embracing of the EYP status ideal. Yet recognition and acceptance of the role within the public domain appears to be slow; indeed Whalley (2008) contends that an understanding of the new professionalism within early years practice may take up to a generation to be accepted.

The views of these EYPs in training on professional attributes, the third theme, clustered around three topics: qualities and knowledge, interpersonal skills and leadership. In respect of knowledge, self knowledge, particularly knowledge of their 'own strengths' was mentioned, reflecting a recognition of their newly found role of working with other professionals. Specialist early years knowledge and general knowledge and experience were also considered important professional attributes. The EYP as a graduate professional award does of course make a connection between the importance of a graduate level of knowledge and the notion of being a professional.

The EYPS candidates viewed the following interpersonal skills and qualities as professional attributes, namely being: 'understanding', 'a listener,' 'trustworthy,' 'genuine,' 'consistent,' 'believing,' 'passionate' and 'a risk taker'. Such views correspond to the two aspects regarded by Miller et al (2005: 25) as characterising professional behaviour: namely professional attributes and knowledge. Miller and her colleagues identified similar professional attributes such as 'commitment, conscientiousness and humanity' as being of particular value in education and care settings, alongside competence and knowledge and specific skills developed through professional practice.

Professional attributes associated with leadership were expressed in the discussion by the use of the following terms: 'motivational,' 'to inspire others,' 'being a role model,' 'enabling,' 'charisma,' 'improves,' 'progressive,' 'strategic,' 'decision maker' and 'delegate'. Their use suggested the

candidates' understanding of the leadership aspect of the EYP role. An important aspect of professional behaviour, it means that practitioners should be able to 'move thinking and practice beyond what is normally done' (Miller et al, 2005: 25). Leadership attributes and behaviours are required for this part of the EYP role and in the discussions such leadership attributes were clearly identified.

As for a wider professional identity as an EYP, the fourth discussion theme, the views expressed demonstrated an understanding of this at an individual level. Currently, though, there is no chance of a national professional identity through belonging to a distinct professional group which EYPs can join after achieving the status. According to Miller et al (2005) the establishment of a national professional group for EYPs could provide a forum to develop an understanding of professionalism within the context of early years practice, it could define a national understanding of the EYP role and of professional behaviours within that role to promote professional effectiveness. It could also collectively challenge policy and practice in a reflective way and provide professional credibility for the EYP within the early years workforce and the public domain (Osgood, 2006).

The aspiring EYPs' views on belonging to a professional group highlighted their need for a collective professional identity in 'a cohesive group', with a clear 'identification' and 'a sense of belonging' and a group characterised by a 'shared vision and understanding'. A need was acknowledged for a 'collective voice' with 'shared agencies' to be actively engaged in 'supporting change', a group that could operate as a vehicle for 'networking', to access 'training', to learn about 'policy and legislation' and to 'improve business'. The need for group member solidarity within a professional body as expressed here, corresponds clearly to this key characteristic of professionalism recognised within the sociology of the professions. These practitioners' distinctly professional attitudes appear to clash with current realities. The lack of such a professional body provides yet more evidence of the problem surrounding the attempted professionalisation of the early years workforce along the lines described here.

Many of the views collected for this paper, coincide with those expressed in a recent Aspect member survey of practising EYPs and

candidates on EYP training pathways (Willis, 2009). This survey attracted 300 responses, 70% being from practising EYPs. Coincidentally, the views of aspiring EYPs explored above also suggest that Aspect, a small professional association and trade union representing UK professionals in education and Children's Trusts, including EYPs but not qualified teachers, may not yet be widely recognised by EYPs as a pertinent professional body.

Aspect survey respondents expressed serious criticism of the conditions they experienced in their new role within the private-for-profit and not-for-profit early years sector and the manner of their deployment. Lack of recognition of the new status and role, lack of career prospects, lack of parity with teachers, as well as scant improvements in pay and conditions after acquiring the status, with EYPs on average being paid only £1 more than prior to gaining the status, formed major concerns. While most respondents acknowledged some benefits from this professional development for themselves, their colleagues, their workplace and the children using these settings, those working towards EYP status spoke out even more strongly in favour of key developments such as agreed pay scales and terms and conditions. According to the survey:

...it was noticeable above all how consistent across all groups the results are, and how clearly EYPs believe change is necessary and action must be taken if the EYP project is to survive.

(Willis, 2009: 9)

The unequivocal reservations expressed here about the absence of the professional recognition, respect and reward considered their due by the practitioners surveyed, serve to reinforce the argument that in reality this new professional status lacks most of the essential characteristics associated with professionalism. Concern is justified as to how long these EYPs can be retained in the children's workforce under these conditions, or the future likelihood of EYP training pathways remaining attractive to early years practitioners. This survey too, highlights EYP professional attitudes and expectations coming into conflict with current workplace and workforce realities in England.

Conclusion

In this paper we employed a literature review coupled with EYP testimonies to argue that the creation of Early Years Professional Status can be seen as a flawed attempt at professionalising the early years workforce. We supported our argument with reference to sociological theories of the professions, demonstrating how despite the best efforts and professional aspirations and attitudes of the practitioners involved, the new status fails to match each of the four main criteria identified there as characteristic of professionals and professionalism.

Rather than leading to a reconceptualisation of the role of early years practitioners, the creation of this new status appears to have exacerbated pre-existing institutional and conceptual divides between teachers and other practitioners working with the youngest children. Any crossover between EYPs and qualified teachers within the workplace is impossible, as EYPs cannot be employed in early years settings within the maintained sector such as in state-funded nursery classes and nursery schools. As a consequence of these limits set on EYP employment, young children may receive their early education and childcare from distinct groups of professionals, depending on the nature of the early years setting they attend.

Disappointingly, nowhere in this process of transition from a largely informal workforce to a more professionalised approach do we detect an impact on policy developments from the important debates and new ideas concerning early years professionalism which are taking place elsewhere (Boddy et al, 2005; Dalli, 2008; Karila, 2008).

We questioned whether the current process of professionalising the early years workforce should be described as a work in progress, or rather as a missed opportunity. Evidence is presented here of commitment to professional practice, leadership and professional ideals among early years practitioners working as EYPs and studying on EYP training pathways. This coupled with the fact that many of the identified constraints are eminently amenable to being addressed at central and local government levels and by

national training and professional organisations, suggests to us that true progress remains feasible.

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NOTES

[1]The terms early years and early childhood will be used interchangeably in this article, as the current Government chose the term early years in preference to early childhood to denote a new category of professional work with young children: early years professional status. This term differs from current OECD (2006) terminology.

[2].The full terms will be alternated in this paper with its abbreviation EYP for Early Years Professional and EYPS for Early Years Professional Status, as used by the Children's Workforce Development Council in England.