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Abstract

Practitioner voice has been absent from debates regarding what constitutes professional behaviour and practice in the early years. This research identifies and uses the professional knowledge of a group of early years educators to create a typology of professionalism. The typology comprises seven inter-related dimensions of early years professionalism: 1) knowledge, 2) qualifications, training and professional development, 3) skills, 4) autonomy, 5) values 6) ethics and 7) rewards. This typology of professionalism was derived during a two-phase study and aims to contribute to ongoing debates about what constitutes professional practice within and across the early years (birth to five years). Phase 1 comprised a sample of 12 early years educators in England, from a range of professional backgrounds, and Phase 2 returned for further reflections to nine of this sample, six years later. They talked about their best work for children and their families and how this developed over time. Their perceptions of children's needs were at the heart of their professionalism and they interpreted policy and curriculum in ways that they believed met those needs. Their views on professionalism remained constant during both phases of research despite a shifting policy scene in early years.

Keywords

early years, professionalism, typology of professionalism

Introduction

The aim of this study was to elicit the thinking of 12 early years educators in England via personal reflection on their professionalism, in acknowledgement of the need to understand the complexities of their roles from their perspectives. The study provides innovative insights into the participants' knowledge domains, beliefs and practices, demonstrating the interplay between personal voices and professional ideologies. The ways in which their voices were elicited is key to the study and thus this article reflects on effective elicitation techniques. The study demonstrates how eliciting the thinking of early years educators can inform the contemporary debates about professionalism.

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The context and policy climate across the two phases of research

This research was stimulated by the concerns of early years educators attending my in-service modules in the late 1990s. They spoke of feeling challenged by prevailing educational change, as they believed that an outcomes-driven curriculum did not adequately reflect the complexity of young children's learning. These concerns were imparted prior to the launch of the Foundation Stage (QCA and DfES, 2000), a significant landmark which gave the early years of education in the UK a distinctive identity. Phase 1 of this study occurred directly after the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) which provided the expectations for children aged from three to the end of the reception year (aged five years). The curriculum was framed as 'stepping stones' or 'competence indicators' which 'identify developmental pathways' to achieving the early learning goals in six areas of learning (Wood, 2007: 127). The affirmation of teaching and learning through a play-based pedagogy was seen as reclaiming important principles and practice by educators (Anning, 2008). However, there were other perspectives regarding the suitability of the CGFS. Moss (2006) described the document as a technical manual from which educators taught and assessed prescribed outcomes. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) believed that the requirements of the CGFS were over-optimistic, as it required a high level of subject and pedagogic knowledge. However, Hargreaves and Hopper's (2006), Keating et al.'s (2002) and Lewis's (2002) research found it was broadly welcomed by practitioners because it emphasized the role and value of play in supporting young children's learning.

Phase 2 of the research took place in 2006/2007 and during the interim, the policy initiatives of Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2003a), Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003b) and the Children's Workforce Strategy (DfES, 2005a) had been introduced. Other initiatives to raise the status and qualifications of the UK early years workforce included the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (DfES, 2005b) for the managers of the Children's Centres and the Early Years Professional Status (CWDC, 2007). In September 2008, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfCSF, 2007) was established as a single curriculum framework for young children from birth to five years built upon principles established in the CGFS (QCA and DfES, 2000). The DfES (2006a) online consultation of the EYFS indicates that whilst many practitioners seemed to be satisfied with the documents, others were less positive. Moss (2007: 5) found the EYFS documentation to be highly prescriptive with 'over 1500 pieces of specific advice' and 'no democratic space'.

Both phases of the data collection occurred within a context of continuing policy changes in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). These changes brought 'heightened additional standards' against which practitioners needed to demonstrate their own competence and professionalism (Osgood, 2006a: 6). The two phases of research had spanned these crucial eras of reform and the sample of early years educators had been variously affected by new policy demands, curriculum revisions, restructuring of settings and changes in role.

The development of early years professionalism and its influence

At the heart of this study is a debate about professionalism, a contemporary and contentious issue during the last quarter century for many professions. It is recognized as a complex changing phenomenon located in specific cultural and historical situations (Friedson, 1994, 2001). It 'defies common agreement as to its meaning' despite widespread use of the term 'professionalism' in the media and everyday discourse (Hoyle and John, 1995: 1). This lack of consensus occurs because

its use varies both pragmatically and conceptually within a complex society. Professionalism has been explored across the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, history and education, and theorists have formed different models: social relationship (Sims et al., 1993); process (Friedson, 1994); functional (Hoyle and John, 1995); postmodern (Goodson, 2003); activist (Sachs, 2003) and occupational (Evetts, 2009). Traditionally, theorists studying professionalism defined it through the analysis of 'traits' (Millerson, 1964). Eraut (1994) has been critical of this identification of traits, as they are created, he says, from the theorists' own perspectives. However, he affirms that debates about 'traits' are effective, as they draw attention to characteristics of professionalism that are worth emulating. This study elicits the thinking of a sample of early years educators and in doing so determines the traits that they identified as components of their professionalism. These traits were analysed and have contributed to a typology of ECEC professionalism as presented here.

Internationally, there have been diverse perspectives about professionalism for those working in the field of ECEC. In 1985 Katz promoted eight concepts of: social necessity; altruism; autonomy; code of ethics; distance from client; standards of practice; prolonged training and specialized knowledge for her definition of early years professionalism. Saracho and Spodek (2003) recommended a model of craftsmanship, whilst Oberhuemer (2005) proposed a democratic model of four professional activities of interacting with children: care management and leadership; partnership with parents and knowledge base. In Friedman's (2007: 126) opinion 'professionalism is like a ball of knotted string' that requires such 'knots' as gender and power, ethics, leadership and change to be opened and untangled. All this leads to the conclusion that definitions of professionalism are complex. As Evetts (2009) advised, there needs to be a further analysis of the discourse of professionalism reconstructed within professional occupational groups. Those working in ECEC in England have historically had an ongoing and complex struggle to negotiate their professional status with employers, governments, clients and the general public (Frost, 2001). There are still divisions in the workforce because of the different titles, qualifications and expectations of roles denoted by national standards and competences, which has led to status differences and ambiguous job classification. The time is therefore right for a 're-conceptualisation of professionalism in the context of the early years' (Campbell, 2003: 243) and the voices of those working in the field therefore need to be elicited to create a more comprehensive perspective of professionalism for ECEC.

Until recently the majority of government initiatives in the UK lacked the voices of early years educators; they themselves also have not always engaged in professional discourse or addressed issues at policy level (Osgood, 2006b). The ability to reflect on and evaluate one's professional role and its practical application must be the key to professionalism in the early years (Hughes and Menmuir, 2002). The field requires a knowledgeable, highly qualified and articulate workforce and practitioners need to be able to define what their own professionalism entails (Moyle, 2001). It would seem timely to promote a re-conceptualization of early years professionalism through developing a research agenda that 'explores issues of professional roles and identity' (Woodrow, 2007: 241). This study enabled a group of educators of young children to voice their issues in ways that allowed them to disseminate their professionalism and professional knowledge.

The methodological approach: Eliciting practitioner thinking

The methodology is a central tenet of this study, since the effectiveness of the elicitation of the early years educators' thinking directly affects any subsequent definitions of professionalism.

'Voice' is a term used increasingly by researchers who want to determine educators' thinking; influences on the research design included Anning and Edwards (1999), Bennett et al. (1997), Day (1999), Moyles et al. (2002) and Nias (1989). Nias (1989) was a pioneer in eliciting teacher thinking to understand aspects of teachers' personal identity within their professional work. Her longitudinal research makes extensive use of verbatim interview evidence with teachers based on a loosely framed set of questions that encouraged long discursive replies. Day (1999) elicited teachers' voices from primary and secondary education to contribute to knowledge of teacher professionalism through stories about how their personal and professional lives had been affected by the government imposed change. Bennett et al. (1997) were interested in discovering what influenced their sample of nine early years teachers' provision of a pedagogy of play. Prior to their study there had been little previous research regarding how teachers' understandings, values and beliefs informed their planning, teaching methods, provision and assessments of play. Anning and Edwards's (1999) research with 20 professionals from welfare, health and education helped make their tacit knowledge explicit, as they seemed unaware of the strengths of their professional knowledge. With probing, they were able to articulate and acknowledge the depth of knowledge and expertise they had developed. Moyles et al. (2002) elicited practitioners' implicit theories, values, beliefs and thinking through video-stimulated-reflective-dialogue. They found this a valuable methodological tool for drawing out practitioners' deeper reflections and perceptions of their pedagogy, eliciting more enhanced thinking and articulation than standard interviewing methods.

These studies indicate that the successful eliciting of practitioners' voices and thinking needed to take place in a supportive environment, with discussions over time to facilitate reflection and produce insights. The role of the researcher is crucial not only in eliciting open responses, but in understanding the context from which these responses were drawn, so knowledge of the field and respect and interest in the respondents' work are important. Policy has not always acknowledged the professional knowledge or status of early years educators, yet how they themselves perceive their professional roles is crucial to how they operate as professionals. This study gave early years educators opportunity to voice their interests and issues and enabled them to reflect on their professionalism during key periods of policy development.

Applying an interpretive research paradigm

Research on eliciting thinking can be approached from two different positions: either adopting a theoretical researcher perspective or a practitioner perspective. The former position normally has the theoretical perspective set prior to data collection; respondents fit within a framework of the researchers' selected theory, policy or curriculum practice, and data are gathered through questionnaires, surveys and observations. The second type of research is undertaken to determine educators' own understandings, with accounts in their own terms, often through in-depth open-ended interviews: 'the knowledge claimed is of the individual case: of what things are and how they work in particular circumstances' (Clandinin, 1986: 11). Educators develop and hold implicit theories, which are most likely eclectic, drawn from varied sources of personal experience, academic knowledge, beliefs and values. These systems of thought are not clearly articulated or codified by their owners, but they are typically inferred and reconstructed by researchers (Clark, 1995). A key objective of this study with early years educators was that the participants themselves should raise their interests and issues and in this way the traits of their professionalism could be established.

In order to determine the most effective strategies to elicit a depth of thinking, a pilot was undertaken with a sample of six practitioners. This enabled the refinement of the research methods and

prompted a mixed method approach of 'face to face' methods of semi-structured interviews, video-reflective-dialogues, the discussion of personal-professional timelines and a focus group meeting combined with more 'distant' techniques of questionnaires and email correspondence. These multi-methods provided different kinds of data on the same issues, allowing exploration of what the respondents were saying in different contexts and enabled triangulation across both the phases. The methodology was interpretative and exploratory as it ascertained and further explored the interests and issues that the participants raised.

Collecting the data

This two-phase research explored 12 early years educators' perspectives on their critical issues, the complexities of their roles, their professional knowledge base and the impact of policy changes on their practice. The sample comprised two each of foundation stage teachers; reception teachers; nursery nurses; headteachers; managers and lecturers in early years. They will be referred to collectively as early years educators (EYEs). The participants had not participated in the pilot and so were 'uncontaminated'. They were recommended by local authority managers or university lecturers; situated in three local authorities in West Yorkshire and were diverse in gender (nine female and three male); ethnicity (included one dual heritage and one South Asian respondent); age (spread fairly equally between 24 to 55 years) and their length of service (ranging from four to 30 years).

The data collection strategies used in both phases of the research were compatible with eliciting voice and complied with the principles of this methodology as discussed in the section describing the methodological approach. The different methodological techniques elicited data about the respondents' professional knowledge, critical issues in their working lives and the perceived impact of policy changes on practice. They comprised:

- An initial visit to each participant's setting to establish the context in which they worked.
- A continuing professional development (CPD) questionnaire which provided factual evidence of background and professional context, including training, qualification and experience.
- A private production of a timeline of personal and professional events (using my own as a guide) that was a non-intrusive technique that demonstrated the interplay between personal and professional lives.
- A semi-structured interview of one hour which allowed the respondents to raise their interests and issues about their professionalism and professional roles. They voiced their knowledge, expertise, perception of role and self-identity.
- A video-reflective-dialogue was undertaken with five of the respondents which enabled them to reflect on selected aspects of their practice. They contextualized reflection on practice and elicited information about curriculum, pedagogy, play and inclusion.
- All the EYEs were invited to attend the focus group meeting to raise issues arising from the research. It promoted debate and raised wider educational issues.
- Phase 2 of the research consisted of a further semi-structured interview of one hour which enabled the respondents to reflect on any changes in role, policy and professionalism.

The participants and their respected methods of participation in both phases of the research are identified in Table 1.

Table 1. Role and participation in the research

	Role 2000–2002	Involvement Phase 1	Role 2007–2008	Involvement Phase 2
NN1	Nursery nurse foundation stage unit	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Video-reflective-dialogue	Nursery nurse in same Foundation Stage Unit	Interview
NN2	Nursery nurse primary school	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Focus group	Working with SEN children	Unable to contact
RT1	Reception teacher	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Focus group	Emigrated to USA Full time mother two young children	Email interview
RT2	Reception teacher	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Video-reflective-dialogue	Nursery teacher same school	Interview
HT1	Headteacher nursery school	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Video-reflective-dialogue Focus group	Headteacher, setting now a children's centre	Interview
HIS	Headteacher/ owner independent Montessori School	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview	Headteacher University lecturer	Interview
MWN	Manager workplace nursery	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Video-reflective-dialogue Focus group	Manager workplace nursery	Interview
MSS	Manager Sure Start setting	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview	Local Authority's Early Years Service Freelance assessor	Interview
LFE	FE/HE lecturer college Nursery teacher	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Focus group	Teacher children's centre Freelance advisor	Interview
LHE	HE lecturer college	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview Focus group	University lecturer New baby	Interview
FST1	Teacher Early Excellence Centre	Timeline CPD questionnaire Interview	Unknown	Unable to contact
FST2	Teacher Early Excellence Centre	Interview Focus group	Primary teacher	Unable to contact

The findings indicated that using several research instruments elicited a breadth of data and different aspects of knowledge – using one technique in isolation would not establish a holistic representation of respondents' thinking.

Open elicitation: A key principle of the methodology

The researcher needs to distinguish between different methodological approaches, identifying the advantages and disadvantages and then employing those most appropriate for the research. The semi-structured interviews, video-reflective-dialogues and focus group meeting were interactive processes and these combined strategies were effective in gaining deeper insights into the values and views of the respondents (Blenkin and Kelly, 1997; Sabar, 1994; Sachs, 1999; Strachen, 1993). As stated earlier, enabling the respondents to raise their interests and issues was an important feature of the methodology. 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 interviews began with open questions – in phase 1 this was 'How did you become an early years educator?' and in phase 2 'What have you been doing for the last seven years?' These opening gambits not only commenced a wealth of detailed responses, they also established the locus of power with the respondent rather than the researcher. This was the case in all the face-to-face data collection strategies, as the respondents determined the direction of the video-reflective-dialogues and focus group meeting, within the frame established by the researcher.

It is important to show rigour in qualitative research, by ensuring that the philosophic position of the researcher is made clear through acknowledging personal beliefs so that interpretations are reliable (Meade, 2000). As the research progressed, I critically analysed the data to examine my researching techniques and so checked that the voice of direction had resided with the respondents. Mishler (1990) argues for a perspective of validity where issues of meaning and interpretation are fundamental – the role of the researcher is to verify honest perceptions of respondents' thinking. It was also important that I accepted that my professional knowledge and understanding as a practitioner would be influential on the interpretative nature of the analysis. In addition, I recognized that this knowledge deepened and became more explicit as the analysis process developed. The nature of the relationships between respondents and researcher was also an important element of the research: the trust established between us enabled the quality of the data to be strong. The typology is therefore formed from the respondents' thinking and is a genuine reflection of their voices.

Analysing the data sets

The findings from all the interrelated analysis of the data sets across both phases of the research revealed insights into the EYEs' perceptions of their professionalism, knowledge domains, values and practice. All the data sets were transcribed and the sorting, coding and analysis was undertaken at several levels to form constructs. Multiple layers of meaning and themes emerged through repeated interrogations of the questionnaires, timelines and transcripts of recordings. These first levels of analysis were undertaken through highlighting, making notes and concept mapping to determine the respondents' issues and interests. This facilitated an increasing familiarity with the data and iteratively led to the formulation of the codes and themes. This content analysis gave rise to a total of 98 codes allocated across the data sets – these were the substance of the respondents' thinking and so the 'traits' of the respondents' professionalism began to be established. These

codes were each located within three core themes of 'professionalism'; 'working relationships' and 'curriculum and pedagogy'.

Qualitative data need to be well organized to allow for coding and theory building and the amount and complexity of the data collected required a further and more rigorous method of analysis. It was necessary to determine the 'strength' of the codes, those which had priority for the EYEs across the data sets.

WINMAX (1998) Computer Assisted Quality Data Analysis Software was therefore employed in the coding, sorting and analysing of the data sets and in Phase 2 the updated software of MAXQDA (2007) was used. These CAQDAS programmes had been recommended as suiting the purposes of the research and they facilitated the tracking, retrieving and redefining of the data. According to Silverman (2000) CAQDAS should save time; improve rigour, develop theoretical aspects and consistent coding schemes and this proved to be the case. This analysis process enabled the individual interests and priorities across the participants to be identified through the quantification of the number of 'hits' a coding received. This enabled the verification and consistency of the content analysis. In this way the initial 98 codes were filtered down into those which had priority across the participants and so the traits of the respondents' professionalism were confirmed.

As I became immersed in depth of the data analysis, I started to realize that the three themes of professionalism, working relationships and curriculum and pedagogy, were overly generic concepts. In order to capture the richness about the EYEs' professional lives and how they constructed their professionalism, I returned to the data sets and examined them further. As I characterized and grouped the collective traits so that an honest and meaningful outcome could be conveyed, seven overarching dimensions of professionalism emerged from the data – knowledge; qualifications, training and professional development; skills; autonomy; values; ethics; and rewards. These seven dimensions both reflect the extensive literature search on professionalism and correspond to what the EYEs demonstrated to be important. The complexity resides in the traits, which are derived from the respondents' perspectives, evidenced in the findings and were found to be consistent across both phases of the research. They provided a typology that seemed to depict the complex fashion of the participants' lives and this is demonstrated in Table 2.

This article presents empirical research that has led to the creation of a typology of professionalism – the analysis of the data has enabled systematic classification of the traits that the participants had in common and is a mechanism for further study of these within seven key dimensions. This typology of professionalism is complex and the subsequent sections illustrate this complexity. Both the typology and the following exemplification of the seven dimensions reveal a collective resonance that underpinned the participants' professionalism – there were few differences in their issues with regard to their diverse professional roles and they articulated many similarities regarding the importance of their work with young children. They demonstrated how over the period of the data collection, their knowledge of children's needs and how these can be met had continued to deepen. The participants reflected on how young children develop and learn; the importance of the relationships between home, community, setting and colleagues; and the impact of policy. Aspects of these issues are evident in every one of the seven dimensions and they run like golden threads throughout their discussions of professionalism. Professional knowledge gained through ongoing professional development and integrated with practical experience was strongly advocated by all the early years educators. The typology of professionalism can only summarize the dimensional traits, but the subsequent sections illustrate some of these traits in more detail. The following examples were provided by respondents in Phase 1 and 2 interviews, video-reflective-dialogues and focus group meeting.

Table 2. A typology of professionalism derived from early years educators' perspectives

The seven dimensions of professionalism	The dimensional traits
Knowledge	<p>Knowledge through study of varying theoretical frameworks including child development; how children think and learn; curriculum and pedagogy</p> <p>Knowledge through experience of working with young children and their families</p> <p>Knowledge through experience of children's social and cultural backgrounds and individual needs</p> <p>Knowledge of local and national policy and implications for practice</p>
Qualifications, training and professional development	<p>Qualifications gained through FE, HE and apprenticeship through working with young children, applying knowledge to practical experience</p> <p>Appropriate training with regard to young children's learning and development</p> <p>Training to deliver flexible curriculum and high level of pedagogic knowledge</p> <p>Self-directed continuing professional development</p>
Skills	<p>Planning curriculum and teaching particularly through a play-based pedagogy</p> <p>Observing and assessing young children's learning and development</p> <p>Monitoring and evaluating effectiveness to inform practice and provision; able to reflect and articulate understanding and application</p> <p>Multidisciplinary skills that encompass the demands of the role</p> <p>Effective teamwork skills with different professionals, creating an inclusive ethos</p> <p>Ability to make judgments regarding appropriate practice</p> <p>Effective communication of aims and expectations to stakeholders of families, colleagues, advisors, governors, Ofsted</p>
Autonomy	<p>Recognition of specific professional knowledge and expertise regarding young children's learning and development</p> <p>Able to provide what they see as appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for their particular groups of young children</p> <p>Autonomy over professional responsibilities and allowed to use discretionary judgment</p> <p>Consultation in the shaping of relevant policy and practice that affects young children's education and care</p> <p>Recognition of professionalism, status and value</p> <p>Vocational aspects of working with young children recognized and endorsed</p>
Values	<p>Sharing of a similar ideology based on appropriate knowledge, education and experience</p> <p>Strong belief in teaching and learning through a play-based curriculum</p> <p>Beliefs in principles for appropriate provision that meets children's and families' needs</p> <p>Commitment to professional values and vocation built on moral and social purposes</p> <p>Accountability to the client group of children and families</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

The seven dimensions of professionalism	The dimensional traits
Ethics	Creating an environment of trust and mutual respect inherent in professional role
	Ethical principles and engaging with values regarding young children’s education and care
	High level of commitment to professional role and to children and families
	Collaboration with colleagues in the setting and other professionals
	Inclusiveness whilst valuing diversity in working relationships with children, families and communities
Rewards	Self-regulating code of ethics applied to everyday working practice
	Personal satisfaction, interest and enjoyment in working with young children
	Strong and supportive relationships with young children and their families
	Strong commitment for the professional role and to personal professionalism
	Being valued and gaining acclaim for professional expertise
	Financial remuneration through appropriate salary

The seven dimensions of the early years educators’ professionalism

Knowledge

One of the main criteria recognized in all definitions of professionalism is the centrality of an established body of specialist knowledge (Eraut, 1994; Friedson, 1994; Hoyle and John, 1995). The respondents’ knowledge, understanding and insights contributed to the way they articulated their practice. The complexity and breadth of this became more apparent on revisiting each of the data sets. The participants discussed developmental psychology, how children think and learn, curriculum and play-based pedagogy, individual needs, sociocultural issues and policy development:

For me the first few years of life are so absolutely crucial to the rest of life and I’ve learned so much more the last 20 years, when I’ve looked at psychology, psychotherapy and all sorts of things. (Manager, workplace nursery)

I started looking into Steiner and Froebel and of course that led me to Montessori. (Headteacher, independent school)

There was a difference in emphasis according to their professional role as to what type of knowledge was most relevant to their work. Knowledge about curriculum and pedagogy had a higher profile for those who were classroom based and the ‘caring’ element for those who worked with the youngest children. However, they all emphasized knowledge in their ‘explanations’ about why they operate in certain ways. This knowledge derived from their education, training and practical experience and mainly existed before the different phases of the Foundation Stage. The

participants indicated that it was not policy that had given them this, but that it was inherent in their understanding of children's needs. All the EYEs in the study asserted that they felt confident and knowledgeable about what they provided for young children and could articulate this to parents, colleagues, governors and Ofsted:

We knew what and why and how – we had the answers to the questions and were ready to answer. (Foundation Stage, teacher 2)

I'm very keen that staff do develop themselves and can argue from a knowledge base. (Headteacher, independent school)

Professional knowledge is a complex and contestable field and the participants' personal knowledge accorded with theoretical frameworks though they did not always recognize it. It is possible that practitioners' dialogue has not always been valued highly and judged as being tacit understanding rather than professional knowledge. Their theoretical professional knowledge and contextual practical knowledge were interlinked and this reflects the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1995), Eraut (1994) and Hargreaves (2000). Researcher knowledge of the field is important for eliciting and interpreting information correctly: conducting 'probing' research partly rests on finding the right register to enable tacit knowledge to be made visible and 'theoretical'.

Qualifications, training and professional development

Education and training were culturally and historically located within a particular time in the 1980s and 1990s, rooted in a background of developmental psychology, reflecting on the importance of knowledge of child development. There was strength of feeling amongst the EYEs as they stressed that 'appropriate' training was essential for everyone who worked with young children. They were a well-qualified group – nine with qualified teacher status and three with nursery-nursing qualifications:

... trained teachers are really important for quality education. The teachers take responsibility for the planning and are linked with nursery nurses' key worker groups to oversee that the teaching. (Headteacher 1)

The participants all had early years qualifications and three of them had retrained to work with young children. They indicated how this 'appropriate' training made a difference to quality ECEC. During her PGCE course, one of the EYEs had been placed with a secondary trained home economics teacher in a reception class and she believed that this was inappropriate and 'probably quite unprofessional'. The participants had strong beliefs about the need for rigour and quality and some were quite critical of the training of the students on placement:

There was a lot involved in BTEC. You had a lot of research to do and you had to be really self-sufficient. . . It seems to me nowadays, so many nursery courses. . . I just wonder about the quality. . . (Nursery nurse 2)

In Phase 1 several of the EYEs had been concerned that the early childhood workforce was often under-qualified and inappropriately trained, but in Phase 2 they were much more positive:

I have seen quite a lot of positives and we have raised standards within childcare. (Manager, Sure Start)

Another big thing and I am sure I said it six years ago, is staff inset and their own training, so they keep up to date with all that is going on. (Headteacher 1)

The managers amongst the EYEs welcomed the investment in training and encouraged their staff (and parents) to take up opportunities offered. During this period substantial funding was allocated to the early years to improve quality, professional training and enhance professionalism for all adults within the sector (Riley, 2003). Several of the EYEs were pursuing additional qualifications of NPQICL (DfES, 2005b), Early Years Professional status (CWDC, 2007) and Masters' degrees and all of them talked about their professional development activities.

Skills

Within any profession there must be key skills that characterize the nature of the occupation, involving competence, efficacy, task complexity, communication and judgment (Hoyle and John, 1995; Osgood, 2004; Sachs, 2003). Professionalism is not just related to proficiency: the participants indicated the complex 'skills' of interprofessional practice needed when working in the field of ECEC. Several of them commented their roles were much more physically and mentally demanding than when teaching in primary:

People don't realize how multi-skilled and well qualified you need to be. You can't do the job without being skilled up. (Lecturer, higher education)

The multifaceted skill of educating, which involves understanding teaching methodologies, developing curriculum frameworks and organizing children's learning experiences, was inherent in every-one's role:

I didn't think I would be doing so many things when I look at my responsibilities. I honestly thought that, as a nursery nurse, I would be going into the classroom and working with the children, having my own key worker group, and going home. But not here, I do quite a bit of the teaching as well. . . There are so many initiatives in place and training sessions, so I think I would be able to take a whole range of skills that I have learnt here to another school. (Nursery nurse 1)

The EYEs demonstrated that teamwork was an important skill and effective communication was considered to be important for this to occur. Several of them stated that they worked in a strong team and were effectively integrating their different skills to the benefit of the children:

Teamwork is important and no one is more important than another. We need everyone's skills. Everyone needs to have ownership and be involved. (Manager, Sure Start)

We work well together, we've all got different skills, we integrate them quite well and the children benefit from that. (Nursery nurse 1)

Hargreaves and Hopper's (2006) research findings indicated that the people management and communication skills were perceived to be undervalued by people in other professions. Although multi-disciplinary issues were raised, fully integrated ways of working were not particularly addressed by everyone, but they all were committed to collaboration and teamwork with fellow practitioners.

Autonomy

Most professions aim to have control over their self-regulation, standards and voice in policy. The pilot study had revealed that the respondents believed their autonomy was being eroded and their professional knowledge questioned (Brock, 2003). However, this was not the case in either of the data collection phases. The EYEs had welcomed the introduction of the foundation stage:

I am now more confident in my teaching and what I'm doing is right. (Reception teacher 1)

However both the lecturers had strong opinions about the effects of some curriculum developments on teachers' autonomy:

Since National Curriculum teachers have handed over their professionalism, as once the curriculum becomes a leading feature of a profession coupled with heavy paperwork and accountability in the system then it becomes easier to do as you're told and you are not actually being professional. (Lecturer, higher education)

Participant raised issues regarding how imposed policy change such as performance management, curriculum change, target setting and Ofsted inspections had impacted on their professionalism and practice over the years. However, whilst the participants acknowledged the existence of these, the majority did not seem to be unduly pressurized by them:

Things never stand still, you need to be able to cope with change. . . if people are being challenged and moving forward in ideas, then it's better for the children. (Headteacher 1)

Overall, the data suggest that the group did not have a problem with policy when it affirmed what they believed was important for their professional practice. The findings indicate that they were adhering to their values and beliefs whilst implementing policy and prescribed curricula. Weak practitioners may drift with policy but strong ones do not and these EYEs were a competent sample who had been recommended by advisers and educators in the field. They reflected Wood and Bennett's (2001: 242) research with early years teachers who proved to be 'active agents of change' rather than passive recipients of policy.

Values

Professionals form values and beliefs over time and these are embedded in their personal and professional identities. Throughout imposed policy change, the participants demonstrated that they had protected and preserved their professional integrity. Several of them indicated how they had needed to draw on other's expertise to help reassert core values and beliefs, particularly when challenged by those who did not seem to have knowledge of young children's learning needs. Three of the EYEs who were working with children of reception age had struggled to preserve their professional identity, when their professional knowledge and practice had been challenged by Key Stage 1 teachers:

At the moment there's like a wall between us, we're protecting what we believe should happen to the children and I suppose on their side they're protecting what should happen for National Curriculum. (Foundation Stage teachers)

Public perception of professionalism and status were areas of concern. Several of the participants believed that there was generally a lack of understanding about early childhood education and they

wanted their professional knowledge and experience recognized and accorded appropriate status. NN2 had extremely strong views about his professional status:

I'm a trained nursery nurse and I've earned that right to be called a nursery nurse. . . when we talk about early years practitioners it's not specific enough. . . it's devaluing to be honest. (Nursery nurse 2)

The participants held diverse views on the EYP status; some welcomed the new qualification as it provided more status, further qualification and development, whilst others found it lacked value and credibility. They raised issues about policy development that had demanded significant changes in practice. MSS had been approached by the local authority to work in its early years team and reflected on aspects that challenged her values:

There is such a conflict now there for me. We have created all of the things that the government asked us to do and now there is an about turn and change of emphasis. . . I think I do have strong principles but I am not sure how it all fits with the principles that I am supposed to be working within. (Manager, Sure Start)

Values are bound up in personal identity and beliefs established from a professional knowledge base. In Osgood's (2004) opinion, professionals working with young children are perceived to be committed, investing emotion and personal sacrifice to heightening their professionalism. The EYEs demonstrated strong personal and emotional values about what they believed was in the best interests of children. The values of each EYE were portrayed strongly throughout the data collection.

Ethics

Working in ECEC is a public service that can give personal fulfilment to those who are involved in it, with the elements of vocation, values and ethics being key to the commitment of the professionals involved. Ethics is a complicated concept referring to codes of conduct, moral integrity, confidentiality, commitment, trustworthiness and responsibility (Friedson, 1994; Goodson, 2003; Sims et al., 1993). A clear, shared emotional and intellectual understanding of ethics is important for any contemporary professional, yet there is not a national ethical code for ECEC in England (Brock et al., 2011). Ethics is difficult to locate in the documentation for the General Teaching Council; the Children's Workforce Development Council and the Teacher Development Agency.

The participants' professionalism and working relationships were situated within the immediate contexts of their settings and communities and it was within these contexts that they evidenced an ethic of care and commitment. They reflected on the tensions between education and care, the impacts of politics, socio-economics and related ethical implications. They interpreted these to act in what they believed to be the best interests of the children, families and communities with whom they worked:

Very few people are living a straightforward life from this setting. . . 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 patronizing them. (Lecturer, further education)

I think there are pressures to change communities and especially in the Asian communities where we are looking at low take-up particularly, is that culturally they feel it is their responsibility to bring up their own children. . . They feel it is too young for them to be in nursery settings. (Manager, Sure Start)

Rodd (2006) indicates that EYEs require sensitivity, discretion and personal expertise, as they may be required to deal with ethical dilemmas regarding family situations through demands from family courts and social workers. As accountability to clients and policy-makers has increased with professions becoming more regulated and impersonal, there may be personal and professional conflicts:

That is some of the conflict with the role that I have got now, the policy decisions are not for a part-time officer. I have had quite a rough ride really. (Manager, Sure Start)

Several of the EYEs reflected how each year brought new challenges and difficult ethical issues to contend with in their professional roles. They shared a common purpose, standards and ethics in their work, even though they may have had different positions, responsibilities, qualifications and length of experience.

Rewards

The rewards of being a professional include social status, power, salary, sense of vocation and enjoyment of work. Educators of young children often have huge job satisfaction and value in their work, which contributes to both their personal and professional lives. The EYEs portrayed their strong commitment, enjoyment, affection and satisfaction – they considered these elements to be an important part of their professionalism and they were reflected throughout their dialogues. There was a wealth of evidence that demonstrated their enjoyment of working with young children:

I enjoy my work, I really do. I'm passionate about what I do. I am and I always have been. . . If I could be involved in high quality early years programmes then that was where I wanted to be. . . (Manager, workplace nursery)

They demonstrated Saracho and Spodek's (2003) personal attributes for educators of young children – enthusiasm, warmth and a capacity to encourage and enjoy children. The forming of relationships and the excitement of being involved in young children's learning are tangible rewards (MacNaughton, 2003). The EYEs appreciated the relationships they formed with young children and their enthusiasm and interest permeated the discourse of the participants.

There were mixed views about salary from the EYEs. Most of them were satisfied and several indicated that vocation was important:

It's not money that's the issue really; it's the value isn't it? (Manager, Sure Start)

However two of the three men felt there was little scope for increased salary or promotion as a nursery nurse and further education lecturer:

There again, there's another way in which is not valued, you've got one of the most important jobs in the world looking after someone's children yet you get paid less than someone who washes cars. (Nursery nurse 2)

Soon after the first phase of the research this nursery nurse moved into working with children with special educational needs, which may have increased his perception of his professional standing. Nevertheless, a strong commitment to the field of early years and to the children themselves had been evidenced throughout his and all of the EYEs' dialogues. They showed strong

feelings about the rewards they gained through their professional roles; these were inherent in both their personal and professional satisfaction and should be recognized as a key element of their professionalism.

Conclusion

This research has sought to elicit practitioners' voices to contribute to contemporary debates of early years professionalism. The typology of professionalism is generated through a synthesis of the findings – the EYEs raised the issues and the dimensions and traits are derived from their dialogues. The seven dimensions of knowledge: qualifications, training and professional development; skills; autonomy; values; ethics and rewards were evidenced in both the data sets. Each of the seven dimensions has an equality of status as all are necessary for a holistic view of early years professionalism and they may also be interdependent as the traits within each dimension are complex. The typology is distinctive because it has come from the professionals themselves, but it is not fixed and able to be adapted. The examples the respondents offered provided a flavour of their traits and these have been explicated in the research. Whilst the typology may not be comprehensive as the study was undertaken with a small sample, it was a valuable representative group who demonstrated a collective resonance. The voices of practitioners need to be integrated into any perspective of their professionalism – I have prioritized eliciting their voices and the methodology is a key part of this. The methodology gives integrity and validity to the typology – the triangulation through the multi-method approach and the brief element of the longitudinal research combine to produce a rich data set. The data collection strategies were compatible with a methodology of eliciting voice and the findings indicated that using several research instruments elicited a breadth of data and different aspects of knowledge. The methodology enabled them to talk about what was important to them – the locus of direction lay with the respondents and this was a key principle of the research. The findings acknowledge the complexity and qualities of their work – the participants demonstrated substantial shared understanding of professionalism that crossed both care and education. This typology has been used as a mechanism for exploring what professionalism entails with students on Masters' courses (Brock, 2010) and with other professionals in the ECEC interdisciplinary team (Brock and Rankin, 2011; Brock et al., 2011). It is important for early years professionals to have a voice in shaping policy with their expertise and knowledge sought and respected. The typology should be useful therefore, for ECEC professionals to engage in debate about their professionalism, particularly because of the forthcoming changes that are likely to be instigated by the current Coalition government.

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