

Mirror, Mirror, On The Wall: Reflections Of The Early Years Professional

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What does the term 'professional' mean to the workforce in early years care and education? The need to ask such a question has been exacerbated by recent government policy development in children's services in England with the introduction of the status of Early Years Professional in 2006 (Osgood, 2006; Moss, 2006). This milestone provides an opportunity to reflect on the historical development of the workforce to influence the sector as it is today.

Terminology that identifies those who are the early years workforce is confusing (practitioner, nursery worker, nanny, childcarer and more recently, the early years professional), so a multiplicity of titles may have contributed to confusion about identity, creating uncertainty as to what the various titles, roles and responsibilities mean.

Literature

The development of the early years workforce in England has been influenced by the historical separation of those who care for babies and young children and those who educate them (Sylva and Pugh, 2005). The history of childhood provides insight into past perceptions of children as small adults, in need of training in order to take their place in the world of 'grown ups' (Aries, 1962). Other images and constructs may enhance an understanding of how those who cared for children were seen as minders, a low status role that mirrored the low status of children in society.

In the late 1990s, as part of the National Childcare Strategy (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 1998), the amalgamation of child care and education was not without its challenges; pay, status and conditions of care services compared badly with those in the education sector who generally had higher pay, longer holidays and a shorter working day. Key events such as the Second World War and the death of Victoria Climbié have also had significant impact on demand and provision of childcare, and child protection respectively. Such events inevitably impact on the workforce too, as fundamental ways of working are challenged and can lead to problematisation.

Tucker (1999) argues that problematisation arises from historical influences; media, research and policy portrayal. In the field of early years, current discourse relating to affordable childcare, the early years workforce, working parents and the effects (both beneficial and damaging) of childcare reinforces perceptions of the need for a workforce that is redemptive and offers the children it works with protection and safety (Cohen *et al.*, 2004). Social perceptions of children and childhood that have created

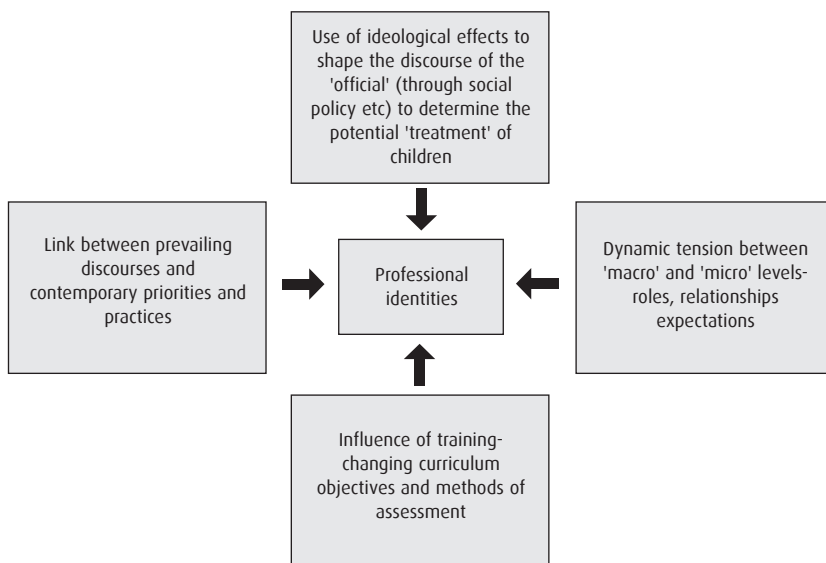
problematisation for the early years workforce include early years care as gender constructs such as 'women's work' (Moss, 2003). A tension arises from the dichotomy between a workforce that is construed as caring, maternal and gendered, as opposed to professional, highly trained, well qualified and equal to teachers and nurses.

Tucker (2004: 84) proposes that any framework that examines professional identity should be able to:

"assist analysis of those forms of discourse that are used to define particular forms of work; show how ideas are struggled over and contested at various levels of experience; and demonstrate how such matters directly impact upon the professional identities which individuals and groups adopt in their everyday work".

In addition, Tucker (2004) offers a framework for analysis that identifies factors involved in the construction of professional identity (see Figure 1). Such factors are helpful in beginning to develop lines of enquiry for this research, and recur in Ellis and Whittington (1988) and Eraut (1994).

Figure 1. Factors involved in the construction of professional identity (Tucker 2004: 88)



Eraut (1994) identifies the training and education that typifies professions, such as a period of time for learning the 'trade' and enrolment on specialist training courses. The increase in Early Childhood Studies degree courses available at Higher Education Institutions reflects the wider opportunities now available for training and development at higher levels for the early years workforce.

Some key themes emerging from literature relating to professional identity were terminology (related to what name the workforce is known by); social policy and the economy and its impact on childcare and education (thus the workforce too); training, qualifications, education and continuing professional development; and issues of gender, status, power and relationships.

Methodology

Documentary analysis offered potential as a research method to explore text in the context of the above themes and prevailing discourses at different points in time. Fealy (2004) undertook discourse analysis relating to nurses in Ireland. He revealed how the public discourse was influenced by culture and socio-political influences, from his analysis of nursing periodicals from the 1920s to the 1980s. Fealy (2004: 649) sought text relating to *"what nurses were doing and saying, including evidence of professional debate."* This method offered a line of enquiry in the search for equivalent discourse relating to early years professionals. Language used in the context of the early years workforce set in a chronological context could illustrate changes in policy development.

"Discourse is a form of power exercised by particular social groups; discourse decides 'who' speaks and what they say, for no one has the right to say anything. ...Hence power and knowledge are joined. As social practices put knowledge to work, it is the discourses that produce truth" (Swingewood, 2000: 197).

Sources that provided historical documentary evidence of discourse pertinent to the early years workforce were selected, with the aim of asking the following key questions of the documents:

1. What terms are used to identify members of the early years workforce (who are not teachers)?
2. What levels of training, qualifications, type of employment, knowledge, understanding and skills and personal qualities are explicit or implicit within the documents?
3. What discourse relates to status, gender and power?

Discourse

It became apparent that the sources located for the earlier decades had scant mention of the early years workforce, other than teachers. Such a paucity suggests an invisibility, and

that the children who were receiving care and education did so from an anonymous workforce, and thus there are implications for its identity.

Table 1 below shows terms used to identify the workforce in texts.

Table 1. Terms used to describe the workforce

Decade	Terminology
1950s	Nursery school helper
1960s	Nursery assistants
1970s	Nursery matron, childminders, qualified nursery nurses, NNEB trained personnel, nursery nurses
1980s	Adults, other adult staff, nanny
1990s	Those working with young children, workers, professionals, nursery staff, staff, those working with under fives, nanny
2000s	Practitioners, nursery nurses, day nursery workers, early years workforce, early years professionals, pedagogues, 'new' teachers

The range of terms presented in Table 1 suggests change, ambiguity and uncertainty. If the terms used are considered in a chronological context, changes can be traced in response to key policy developments: the post World War 2 emphasis on mothers staying at home to care for their children; the expansion of nursery education in the 1970s; the National Childcare Strategy emerging at the end of the 1990s preceded by Margaret Thatcher's nursery voucher scheme; to the current workforce reform. Terms become more varied, general and generic, encompassing those members of the workforce who may be working in a voluntary or unqualified capacity. In the 2000s, new terms are introduced that have not been used before such as 'pedagogue'. Such breadth in an attempt to be inclusive could also create uncertainty. The Children's Workforce consultation (DfES, 2005) sought views on 'pedagogue' or 'new teacher' models: the title Early Years Professional was the outcome, rejecting both.

Searching for textual discourse on issues related to being a professional (training, qualifications, status, personal and professional qualities, gender) identified in the literature provided additional insight. Table 2 indicates views held by academics, researchers, policy writers and others on such issues.

Table 2. Discourse on Issues Related to being a Professional

Decade	Text
1940s	<i>"Women were carefully chosen for their personal and practical experience of the mothering of young children. Where possible they were womenfolk who had had children of their own, and whose children were growing up."</i> (Stross, 1946: 701)
1960s	<i>"The status and salary for aides and nursery assistants would be superior to that of welfare and meals assistants."</i> (Plowden, 1967: 331)
1970s	<i>"You are responsible and practical, with a sense of humour and a real liking for children - the naughty ones as well as the sweeties" and "It is a student's temperament that counts, along with good sense."</i> (Elias, 1972: 14) <i>"They are not grasping money (no-one gets prosperous on illegal minding);...they are providing a sadly necessary but very low-grade service."</i> (Jackson, 1973: 523) <i>"Some concern has been felt about the adequacy of existing courses for work which call for maturity, special skills and more than a little knowledge of child development and family relationships."</i> (Kellmer Pringle and Naidoo, 1975: 132)
1980s	<i>"Are you kind, loving, sympathetic and yet firm with young children?"</i> (Turnor, 1984: 9) <i>"Too often the nursery nurse issue is swept under the carpet ...Nursery nurses host a cluster of grievances, both real and imagined, and imposed and self-inflicted."</i> (Heaslip, 1987: 34) <i>"We cannot ignore the importance of training as a source of information and ideas about child development and pedagogic techniques appropriate for children aged under five."</i> (Osborn and Millbank, 1987: 45) <i>"She must be warm and outgoing and sensitive to the needs of others. Coexisting with her maturity there must be a childlike relish for the joy of playing."</i> (Henderson and Lucas, 1989: 96)
1990s	<i>"A view exacerbated by differences in pay and conditions of employment between qualified teachers and permanent day nursery staff."</i> (Audit Commission, 1996: 69) <i>"The standards of training and qualifications should remain high at each stage. Working with young children is a complex and demanding task - it requires a team of professionals who are appropriately trained to adopt a variety of roles and responsibilities."</i> (Ball, 1994: 58)
2000s	<i>"We need to do more to ensure that working with children is seen as an attractive career, and improve skills and inter-professional relationships. Many of those who work with childrenfeel undervalued, and in some cases under siege"</i> (DfES, 2003: 22) <i>"Working with pre-school children should have as much status as a profession as teaching children in schools"</i> (HM Treasury, 2004: 4)

Repeated demand for improved training and qualifications structure since the 1970s still remains and reinforces a sense of lack of action and strategy in addressing the need to improve training, qualifications and career structure for the early years workforce over past decades. Gender is inextricably tied into the early years workforce: if the workforce is largely made up of women, some of whom will be mothers, is there inherent tension between the role of caregiver to a child whose mother has left to go to work, and the role of mother who should be at home to bring up her children (Cohen *et al.*, 2004)? Themes relating to personal qualities are the need to be maternal, sensitive, knowledgeable, to have an inherent 'talent' and almost to have childlike qualities

themselves in order to be an effective worker. It could be concluded that prior to recent times, assumptions were made that it was only necessary to have such inherent qualities and be a mother to become a member of the workforce and not to be able to meet any other pre-requisites (Fealy, 2004).

Conclusion

What has discourse revealed in terms of insight into the professional identity of the early years workforce? The definition of what a professional is suggests that it requires a high level of training and education. This is an aspiration that is only now becoming within the grasp of the early years workforce. The unheeded demand for improved status and training however suggest voices unheard.

Invisibility may also be sustained through lack of voice and presence in policy and discussion. Power and knowledge are implicit in the discourse presented in this research. Changes over time reveal knowledge that ranges from subversion (illegal minding) to resentment (having grievances about relative status compared to teachers, for example), to being expected to have a liking for children and play in order to become a practitioner. Siraj-Blatchford (1993) cites the vulnerability of women, the influence of media and modern misconceptions as exacerbating factors in the lack of status of early years work.

Some (Liddle 2006) believe that being an early years practitioner is the same as being a parent, and is dismissive of the need to promote the status and training of the workforce. It could be argued that a struggle is emerging and the power to bring about change lies with the workforce and its supporters.

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