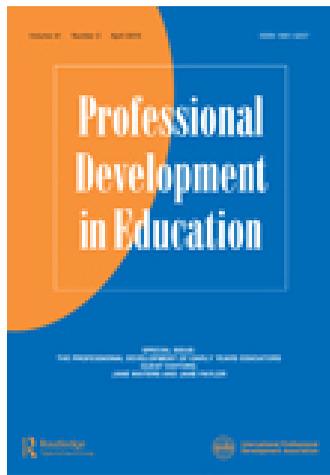


This article was downloaded by: [Cambridge University Library]

On: 03 July 2015, At: 06:23

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



Professional Development in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjie20>

The professional identity of early years educators in England: implications for a transformative approach to continuing professional development

Sarah Lightfoot^a & David Frost^a

^a Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 2PQ, UK

Published online: 12 Mar 2015.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Sarah Lightfoot & David Frost (2015) The professional identity of early years educators in England: implications for a transformative approach to continuing professional development, *Professional Development in Education*, 41:2, 401-418, DOI: [10.1080/19415257.2014.989256](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.989256)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.989256>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

The professional identity of early years educators in England: implications for a transformative approach to continuing professional development

Sarah Lightfoot* and David Frost

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 2PQ, UK

(Received 30 August 2014; accepted 14 November 2014)

This article examines the professional identity of nine early years educators currently working in the early years sector of education in England. These educators include teachers, teaching assistants, nursery practitioners and nursery nurses working with children three to five years old in the Early Years Foundation Stage in state-maintained schools. The article arises from a doctoral research study that gives voice to the professional identities of these early years educators. The policy background and particular context in which the research is carried out are outlined. The article reports on an exploration of these educators' storied perceptions of their professionalism, which is multi-dimensional, complex and cannot be reduced to a list of personal characteristics, responsibilities and duties. The educators' experiences of continuing professional development are considered and an alternative approach is suggested in light of these educators' needs in terms of being valued, having connections and making a difference in their work contexts.

Keywords: continuing professional development; early years education; early years educators; professional identity; professional learning

Introduction

The stimulus for this research was prompted by conversations with early years educators (EYEs) in England. Some EYEs seemed enthusiastic about recent policy innovations; keen to enrol on programmes that confer professional status or inspired by recent in-service training to make changes to classroom environments. Others appeared confused about the rate of change within the sector and what appear to be increasingly intensified working conditions. They described a range of feelings including disillusionment with their role, a sense of a loss of control over their daily practice and anxiety at a perceived downward pressure to prepare children for the next stage of more 'formal' schooling. It seemed important to consider how their differing experiences and emotional responses related to their perceptions of themselves as educators of young children. These conversations prompted an exploration of the notion of professional identity and the ways in which it might be construed, negotiated, sustained and contested.

The exploratory study outlined in this article focused upon the experiences of nine EYEs who work with three to five year olds in the Early Years Foundation

*Corresponding author. Email: sl323@cam.ac.uk

Stage (EYFS) in maintained primary and nursery schools in England. Its overarching aim is to explore and understand how these particular members of the workforce who have a multiplicity of qualifications, titles, roles and responsibilities and widely differing contracts, pay and working conditions negotiate and perceive their professional identities. This initial study seeks to build a conceptual model of professional identity in early childhood education that can inform further research. This entails exploring the types of development opportunities which might contribute to the growth of a particular form of professionalism for all those who work with the youngest children.

We begin with an attempt to clarify what is meant by professional identity and how this relates to those working in the EYFS in England. We then offer a framework for understanding EYEs' sense of professional selves arising from their own perspectives, noting the role of the landscape in which they work in terms of their institutional context, current policy directives and other influences that affect the ways and the extent to which the early years workforce are characterised as 'professional'. We then discuss the implications of these findings for the role of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes that might contribute to influencing, enhancing or transforming professional identity.

We use the term 'early years educators' throughout the article.¹ When using this term we are referring to all adults working in EYFS classrooms irrespective of their role, job title or qualifications.

Conceptualising early childhood educator professional identity

A first step was to explore the concept of professional identity as it pertains to the work of EYEs in England in nursery and reception classes in maintained schools. The concept of professional identity is not straightforward: our brief exploration can be summarised by saying that it is inextricably linked to personal identity; it is not fixed but dynamic; it is multi-faceted; and changes in professional identity are linked to the concept of human agency. These dimensions are discussed in brief below.

The notion of professional identity cannot be separated from that of personal identity. Professional identity is not simply a matter of a role being adopted for instrumental reasons in the context of an occupation. It is not the sum total of attributes, beliefs and values used to define people in specialised, skill-based and education-based occupations or vocations (Benveniste 1987, Ibarra 1999). In short, it is about who we are rather than the part we are playing. A person's professional identity is bound to be unique on the grounds that there are many antecedent and contributory factors. It has long been argued that identity is always bound to be a 'work in progress' rather than a fixed state (Erikson 1975). Thus we can come to the idea of a process of 'identification' which implies that human beings are continuously engaged in the enterprise of identifying themselves (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). A comprehensive review of the literature on teachers' professional identity supports this idea of identification being an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences (Beijaard *et al.* 2004).

Using the idea of identification immediately raises the question of the influences on that process, which is where the concept of socialisation comes into play. Social identity theory tells us that we identify ourselves through membership of social groups (Tajfel 1982, Jenkins 2008). Stryker and Burke (2000, p. 285) précis Mead's (1934) work on identity as 'society shapes self shapes social behaviour'. Identity is

then malleable and dynamic. It affects our behaviour and is affected by the experiences we have. Inevitably there are dilemmas and tensions involved in the construction and reconstruction of professional identity. Coldron and Smith (1999) found that teachers' professional identity, while being unique, nevertheless reflects the educational context or landscape that he or she is part of and it is in classroom practice where this becomes visible. Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) argued that professional identity changes owing to shifts in this landscape; for example, through policy change. These changes can be emotionally fraught as teachers attempt to maintain their 'story to live by'; a narrative thread that educators draw on to make sense of themselves and their practice.

Not only is professional identification a dynamic process but it also features sub-identities that may be more or less harmonised (Beijaard *et al.* 2004). For some writers there is an emphasis on the struggle to define yourself when circumstances may appear to be demanding a different identity construction (MacLure 1993). This may be linked to Eric Hoyle's (2008) discussion about the idea of teachers having a 'samizdat professionalism' as a strategy for being true to their values while satisfying externally generated requirements that might be at odds with these values. The idea that practitioners might be engaged in some kind of struggle for their identity suggests that a crucial variable here is human agency.

Agency is identified by Beijaard *et al.* (2004) as being an important element of teacher professional identity. The idea of identity being a self-constructed phenomenon suggests that individuals have some capacity for agency. Bruner talked about agency as a defining characteristic of humankind and how it is second nature for us to engage in reflection and the construction of narratives about our 'agential encounters with the world' (Bruner 1996, p. 36). From a sociological perspective, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory offers an explanation of the process by which social structures shape identity but are in turn shaped by the agency of individuals. This account is supported from a psychological perspective, especially in Bandura's (1989) extensive work in which he talks about agency being effected through 'reflective and regulative thought'. Reflection emerges as having a key role to play in enabling individuals to construct their identities and keep them under review, so to speak.

These themes are also apparent in the more recently emerged area of research concerning professional identity of EYEs. Although the research aims and methodologies employed differ, studies indicate that professional identity is dynamic rather than stable and fixed in biology and emphasise the social and discursive nature of these constructs (Davies 1989, MacNaughton 2000). Some do not provide a clear definition of the concept but highlight its close connection to a number of other features of professionalism which may be internal or external to the individual. These include discussions of:

- the interplay between personal and professional identities (Harwood *et al.* 2013);
- practitioner gender and class (Osgood 2006);
- the role of reflection in identity construction (Bleach 2014);
- the influence of national policy on EYE professional identity (Woodrow and Busch 2008); and
- the media's portrayal of the EYE workforce (McGillivray 2008).

Various groups of practitioners have been the focus of research, including student pre-school teachers (Egan 2004), nursery workers in private, voluntary, independent and state nurseries (Osgood 2010), nannies, nursery nurses and childminders (McGillivray 2008) and those with the more recent professional designations of Senior Practitioners and Early Years Professionals (Miller 2008). What is evident from these differently emphasised studies is that the notion of a single or blended definition of professional identity in the sector is problematic.

The professionalisation agenda in early years education

Early childhood education and care in England has been subject to unprecedented attention and relentless change in the last 15 years; some of this designed to eliminate the pervading split between the maintained state sector and the non-maintained private, voluntary and independent sector in terms of the diversity of settings and the provision they offer. This is compounded by a deep, historical institutional divide between early years education in maintained nursery and primary schools and the provision of care for babies and toddlers; for example, by childminders and at day nurseries. There has existed a tension between members of the workforce deemed to be maternal and caring as opposed to those who are degree educated and highly trained. Pay, status and conditions for employees in the private, voluntary and independent sector were and are still generally inferior compared with those in the education sector who are perceived to have more favourable pay, longer holidays and a shorter working day. Within an EYFS classroom in a primary or nursery school, similar tensions may also exist between colleagues. Policy stipulates that a 'school teacher' must be appointed to any reception or nursery class (Department for Education 2014, Department for Education and Skills 2003). However, the team may include others with various roles, responsibilities, qualifications and conditions of employment and traditionally viewed as teacher aides.

Policy integration in 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008) sought to address the split between care and education by focusing on one of the key findings of the EPPE project (Sylva *et al.* 2004) that educational outcomes for young children were best in those settings which successfully united cognitive and social development. The EYFS guidance was further revised following the Tickell (2011) review. Despite the new framework apparently favouring a child-focused approach to early years teaching and learning and an insistence in the non-statutory guidance that children progress at different rates and at different ages, EYEs are nevertheless required to implement a curriculum that emphasises specific learning goals and statutory outcomes for the end of the key stage. The framework is explicit that the adults' overarching goal is ensuring young children are 'ready' for the work of Year 1. As such, this document seems to imply a particular role and identity for those working in this area, one which might involve a model of technical practice and be tightly regulated and subject to judgements in terms of performance. Other characterisations of EYEs have arisen from government policy and initiatives around the nature and purpose of early childhood provision. Those that see early years education as a means of social remediation (Department for Education and Skills 2003) cast the workforce as redemptive; others view them as parent substitutes at once providing a close, intimate relationship with the children in their charge and enabling parents to return to work themselves (Department for Education and Employment 1998).

The last decade has seen a wider policy drive to professionalise the workforce. New Labour's reform during 2005–2010 was driven by a not good enough workforce discourse (Osgood 2006) that involved the creation of an integrated qualifications framework (Children's Workforce Development Council 2006) intended to promote skills acquisition and career progression. Early Years Professional status was conferred after candidates met 39 competency standards with the intention to raise the quality and status of the workforce. Nevertheless, the Nutbrown (2012) review commissioned by the Coalition Government recommended a strengthening of qualifications so that educators might have the essential depth and breadth of knowledge and experience to meet the challenges their job entails. Qualifications introduced 'to move decisively away from the idea that teaching young children is somehow less important or inferior to teaching school age children' (National College for Teaching & Leadership 2013, p. 6) are the 'Early Years Educator' Level 3 role and Early Years Teachers (Graduate) roles that replace the Early Years Professional status. These new roles and qualifications have produced some unrest within the early childhood education and care community, particularly as the Early Years Teacher role does not confer Qualified Teacher Status. The Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators (TACTYC 2013) fear this new qualification will result in graduates who are paid less, have different terms and conditions of employment and fewer career opportunities than primary school colleagues. This newly introduced status then looks likely to promulgate the two-tier system already evident in the sector. The range and variety of qualifications and the type and level of training required to work with young children in England remain confusing, and according to some critics the ramifications of such training and qualifications are the creation of an environment where EYEs are increasingly regulated by government and teaching and learning is reduced to measurable technical outcomes measured through a competency framework (Moss 2006, Osgood 2006, Miller 2008). This raises questions about what being a professional means in the EYFS in England.

Reflecting on the conversations with practitioners referred to earlier, it seems plausible that the differences between these professionals' stories were perhaps related to the individuals' sense of agency as discussed above. Some practitioners were not as inhibited as others by regulatory changes and expectations. These individuals were active in pursuing their interests and talked about themselves and their work context in a positive manner. Why these differences were so pronounced in certain individuals and what enabled them to act as they did requires consideration. Perhaps by 'listening to the separate voices and trying to hear their stories' (Penn 1998, p. 14) it would be possible to explore the respondents' professional identities and begin to understand the types and forms of development opportunities that might support practitioners in making a difference in their work with young children.

The study

As explained earlier, this study recounts an exploratory project in preparation for a doctoral study arising from professional and personal interactions with EYEs. The aim was to ascertain EYEs' own perceptions, with accounts created on their own terms. It contributes to McGillivray's call for, 'future research to seek the views of practitioners themselves in order to explore the complexity of factors that contribute to professional identity' in the early years (2008, p. 252). Consequently the task of

eliciting EYEs' thinking about their professional identity was not approached with a theoretical perspective set prior to data collection. Instead, the researcher (Sarah) was influenced by the work of Nias (1989), who pioneered the use of verbatim interview evidence gathered from a loosely framed set of questions to encourage long, discursive replies. Brock (2012) notes how crucial the researcher role is in this type of study, not only in terms of eliciting a depth of thinking from the participants but also in understanding the context from which the responses are drawn. The researcher's 20 years' experience as a Key Stage 1 and EYFS classroom teacher, including time spent as a school leader, permeates this project in terms of its focus, the methodological choices made, the researcher's interactions with the participants in the study and the sense she made of their responses. In addition there were established working relationships with many of the participants. Previous interactions with some of the participants, particularly those involved with the network group, had involved wide discussions and sometimes frank exchanges about dilemmas and decisions such as those faced on a daily basis by EYEs in terms of their practice and relationships with other colleagues, parents and children. Consequently it was assumed with some confidence that the participants would come to the interviews ready to share their experiences and opinions.

In keeping with its aims, the methodology for this small-scale study was interpretative and qualitative in nature (Creswell 2007). This approach is appropriate because of its potential to generate rich data about the subjective, unique and changeable nature of educators' professional identities. It would also be descriptive, presenting a multi-layered picture of relationships, settings and situations. Interpretivist research focuses on experiences, actions and perspectives of those involved and requires flexibility and responsiveness from the researcher. In order to enable her to facilitate shared understandings, the researcher would need to maximise those relationships already built with participants through dialogue and negotiation, practising those mentoring and consultancy skills described by Rhodes and Beneicke (2002).

To give voice to the subjective identities and experiences of the EYEs a small range of qualitative methods were used, including semi-structured interviews and follow-up conversations by telephone and email. All but one interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis. The other was a paired interview with two co-workers. This gave rise to some animated discussion. Some telephone and email contact was made after the interviews for further clarification of a small number of points. Some of the practitioners also participated in an earlier focus group discussion that was carried out in an informal network meeting. Brock (2012) indicates that a supportive environment is key for stimulating the types of fruitful discussions sought. Interviews took place in a variety of locations according to participants' preferences, including a staffroom, classrooms, an external courtyard and a local café. Some were during the school day and others after children had gone home. One took place during a weekend. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes, although the shortest was 30 minutes in length and the longest was two hours in duration. The interviews were digitally recorded and partly transcribed. Notes were also made throughout, reflecting on the context of each interview. Informed consent was acquired from all interviewees and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity was provided – all names used subsequently are pseudonyms.

The loosely structured interviews began with an invitation to 'tell me about your role here?' Detailed responses followed and so we can say that the initial direction of the discussion was set by the EYEs. By not imposing too stringent a schedule of

questions, it was possible to attend to the participants' perspectives about their professional identities. The questions asked varied from interview to interview as the researcher helped respondents to unpick the detail of their stories and sought to uncover the factors that enabled or hindered them in their work as EYEs.

The participants

The EYEs (five early years practitioners and four teachers) who participated in this initial study work within five maintained settings in south-east England. Many of the participants were already known to the researcher. Some belong to an informal network that, according to Marianne, one of the participants, meets regularly in order to: 'share ideas, talk about practice, have a cup of tea and let off a bit of steam'. Other participants are members of schools where the researcher has a connection through previous employment.

There was a disparate mix in terms of age and ethnicity; however, all nine participants in the convenience sample were female, reflecting the broader composition of the workforce. The participants occupied various positions and roles within their settings and had equally variable years of experience and qualifications; all worked with children aged three to five years at the later end of the EYFS. One female primary school head teacher also participated.

Analysing the data

The interviews were transcribed and the sorting, coding and analysis focused on exploring what was important for those EYEs who participated. Initially, reading and re-reading the transcriptions provided an increasing familiarity with the data. Highlighting themes, making notes and simple concept mapping helped to determine aspects of professional identity identified by the participants. This led to the formulation of 45 codes, which began to generate greater insight into the EYEs' perceptions of their professional identities and how they might be shaped by their values, beliefs and experiences, their immediate working context and the wider national policy context. Further reading helped to make connections between these codes and these were grouped accordingly.

Eight major themes emerged from the data, including:

- attraction and commitment to the role;
- experiences of being a professional;
- values held;
- types of knowledge and understanding required;
- degree of agency experienced;
- need for support from the early childhood community;
- influence of school contexts; and
- importance of training and qualifications.

These themes relate well to the literature about professional identity, particularly Brock's (2012) seven dimensions of early years professionalism. Identification of these themes enabled a better conceptualisation of the professional identity of early years practitioners. A next step was to focus on a smaller number of expressed needs

common to the respondents regardless of differences in nomenclature, qualifications, personal biography and workplace:

- being valued;
- having connections; and
- making a difference.

These seemed to capture more adequately the complexity of professional identity as described by the EYEs. Each of these dimensions is now explained and illustrated with examples from the interviews to help demonstrate how they relate to EYEs' professional identities.

Early years educators' perceptions of professional identity

The three overarching dimensions are now used as an organising framework for a discussion of findings.

Being valued

The sense of being valued and its importance to the development and maintenance of a positive sense of professional identity runs like a golden thread throughout the interview stories. No matter what the participants' role or status, the educators' stories all indicate their need for recognition; for their expertise; their personal qualities; that they do a worthwhile job; and their aspirations for themselves and the children whom they educate and care for. Some of these aspects are outlined next.

This need to be valued is perhaps indicative of how those who care for and educate young children have been viewed historically. Their work has been likened to that of 'baby sitters', a low-status role mirroring the low status of children in society (Cohen *et al.* 2004). Such a view reinforces the stereotype that the education and care of young children is women's work; poorly qualified and poorly paid women at that. Unfortunately this image is still perhaps compounded by the fact that education for those under five is non-statutory. This is illustrated by Lisa's comment:

Nursery is viewed as just a bit of playing ... there's no real education going on. We are just kind, smiling ladies playing with little children. They should see my professional development targets ...

Lisa highlights the conflict here between the type of dispositions often described as essential for the role, such as 'caring', 'approachable', 'loving' and 'reliable', and hints at the ways in which such maternal qualities are often exploited or denigrated in the more technicist approaches currently used to demonstrate professional competence (Osgood 2010).

What is evident from the data, however, is the way in which educators have come to make these aspects of the role their own. It does seem that the educators in this study do value these types of personal qualities and appear to invest heavily in the production of a 'caring self' (Skeggs 2003). For Eleni this construct of what it means to be an EYE influenced her career choice:

You have to be patient and understanding. I understand children. I can empathise with them. That's what makes me suitable for the job. That's why I became a foundation stage teacher.

Eleni's professional identity appears to be robust. She appears assured of her role and status and encapsulates this in the use of her title of 'foundation stage teacher'. The other teachers who participated in this study also described themselves in terms of the age group taught, either as a 'foundation stage' teacher or a 'nursery teacher'. All explained their route to Qualified Teacher Status and mentioned the age range they had qualified to teach. There is a sense that they deserve their professional status and identity (Maloney 2010), although as Sadie notes:

I have met people who think I get paid less than secondary school teachers because I work with the youngest children in education system.

Those who participated in the study who are not qualified teachers use a greater number of terms to describe their role and position at their school, although they are employed on similar conditions and contracts as a 'keyworker' for a number of children. Some role names derived from their initial training to work with children: for example, 'nursery nurse' or 'teaching assistant'. Others mentioned the job title on their contract: for example, 'early years assistant' and 'early years practitioner'. The range of terminology employed even in this small-scale study demonstrates some of the complexity of knowing who the workforce is and how they should be known. Cameron (2004) makes the case for a unifying title to refer to those working with young children. However, this is a concern for a number of reasons for two of the educators interviewed, as relayed in the following discussion:

- Lisa: I never call myself a practitioner. I always call myself a nursery nurse in a school ... Practitioner ... what a dry word. It sounds like it's nothing to do with children.
- Nina: I still class myself as a nursery nurse, not an early years professional either.
- Lisa: I feel like my identity has really been watered down ... now you can do an NVQ in 6 weeks and have the same status as us.
- Nina: There are so many qualifications now ... no-one knows what any of them mean ... or what they're worth. I worked really hard for my NNEB. It was a full-time two-year course.
- Lisa: No-one uses the nursery nurse title any more though. It used to be really something once to say you were a nursery nurse. You had trained and specialised to work with babies and children to seven. You were seen as a professional. But now ... It's become obsolete ... people think we are all the same ... I think we'll have to take more qualifications soon.

Breadth in current nomenclature has given way to uncertainty and ambiguity for these two educators. For them, the term 'nursery nurse' was important. They saw it as linked to a worthwhile qualification; it signified a certain status and involved particular knowledge and understanding of young children. This title and their identification with the role are far removed from the 'unfashionable' term noted by McGillivray with its 'connotations of a role that demanded no more than an ability to wash pots' (2008, p. 248). Lisa and Nina went on to discuss how they feel their role has been demeaned and diminished in recent years due to the training and qualifications structure currently in place. They felt that the role and title had been devalued, which impacted negatively on their sense of being valued professionally in schools and in the wider community.

Clare, a recently appointed primary head teacher who participated in the study, noted the importance of names. She had found similar feelings of disillusionment among members of her support staff throughout the school, although none were

nursery nurses. They confided that some of this dissatisfaction came from the different role titles in use and the perceived differences in status and role. Clare took a novel approach to dealing with the situation by altering their job title to ‘assistant teacher’. This was positively received by her staff. Clare observed immediate changes in individuals:

Just something simple like changing their titles. It’s made a complete difference to the way they feel about themselves and their jobs. The atmosphere in school changed overnight. Now we can begin to develop practice with a positive mind-set.

By making these initial changes with her staff, Clare demonstrates her awareness that developing professionals who are committed to working with young children requires an inclusive and coherent identity (Adams 2005).

Making connections

This is concerned with relational aspects of their experiences and how these shape professional identity. EYEs emphasise their connections with children and families, and with other members of the early years workforce in particular. Some participants also explored the extent to which their personal lives and characteristics are entwined with their sense of professional self.

In expressing their professional identity, all participants drew attention to the emotional content of their work. In common with Egan’s findings, ‘the language of care permeates their responses’ (2004, p. 28). They talked of their ‘passion’ for their role and the need to be ‘patient’ and ‘love for children and their families’. Hargreaves (2000) similarly observes that the younger the children involved, the greater the emotional intensity. However, a number of authors note how being perceived as and perceiving themselves to be caring and maternal in their work has contributed to the struggle EYEs have to be recognised as professionals (Moss 2006). Eleni’s comments reflect how she is overcoming ‘advice’ given during her Postgraduate Certificate in Education training that was perhaps given with this in mind:

At university they explicitly encouraged us not to get attached to the children. It wasn’t seen to be being professional. I spent the first few weeks of my NQT year trying to be distant from these tiny children, trying to follow this advice. It just didn’t work. It wasn’t me and it certainly wasn’t helping the children. I realised in fact I needed to be patient, to understand, to empathise ... to be authentic. To show it, to use it. (Eleni)

Here she is engaged in the process of ‘reclaim[ing emotion] as vital and credible in ECEC [early childhood education and care] practice’ (Osgood 2010, p. 130). Similarly, a number of those interviewed were keen to point out that for them there is no paradox between care and education. They do not appear ‘preoccupied with a regulatory gaze that denies them the use of their emotions to inflect professional practice’ (2010, p. 130). They do not seem to have to struggle as Osgood (2010) fears to find opportunities to interact with children and their families that demonstrate their professional purpose as emotionally reflective educators. Instead they deliberately make use of their personal characteristics as a means of connecting to children and families:

They are leaving their most precious thing in the world with you. You have got to show them that you care. (Nina)

For educators like Nina, making highly involved connections between children and their families is essential to their roles as educators. Emotional intelligence appears to these educators not only to be a desirable aspect of their professional identity, but it is recognised as an inherent part of the teaching and learning process (Hargreaves 2000). Such a high level of involvement is seen to be necessary in order to ascertain a child's needs and difficulties so that learning can take place:

Being professional in the early years is absolutely about being attached and in tune with the children. Otherwise how will they learn? (Eleni)

So, as with the participants in Harwood *et al.*'s (2013, p. 10) study, these EYEs appear to be 'resistant to dichotomised ideas of care (ideal mother) and education (techno-rationalist)'. Furthermore, some educators' responses appeared to give glimpses of identities and perceived roles that go far beyond the care versus education debate:

You need to be connected and have a nurturing relationship with children. It's important that you are the children's consistency – you let them know to trust you and then you can help. You've got to have that consistency then they start talking. If you have empathy and listen you can help them. I listen and then something...my brain erupts ... I see something I can use. You have to show them it's ok to be a different colour, it's ok if you can't find the words ... we need to prepare them to be resilient for the world. (Amelie)

Expending oneself in this way can be costly. Osgood (2010) notes the need for support for EYEs to sustain and nourish this aspect of professional identity. The participants in this study draw attention to this, noting how they often feel 'mentally not just physically tired' and 'vulnerable after giving so much every day'. They demonstrate their awareness of how the networks of colleagues to which they belong can help in these circumstances. The networks take various forms: the foundation stage team of colleagues within the school; cluster groups that meet on a regular basis; and online membership of early childhood education forums. These connections and their impact upon the professional self are described in various ways. For Eleni, the opinions of her team members have affected views of herself as an educator:

My teaching assistant has really helped with my confidence. Just little things she says like, 'the way you speak to parents is spot on ... you'd never guess you were in your NQT year'. She mentioned how my planning is really clear ... I can just feel myself grow.

This feeling of validation also runs through Marianne's interview. Although she is a more experienced educator, she admits to having times when she feels uncertain about a newly introduced initiative or in the face of an impending Ofsted visit:

What I like is the backup, the feeling of solidarity and being with others with a shared ethos. I prefer the group input and the support of the network is brilliant. (Marianne)

As hinted at by Marianne, the groups not only provide emotional sustenance. When prompted to explain what she meant by support, Marianne added:

I think with our cluster meetings with other early years colleagues that I learn the most. Our discussions are great and I always get new ideas. The clusters are a smaller group, we have input and influence the theme and so you get more out of it. We have a laugh or even a cry ...

These networks give educators an opportunity to compare stories of their current experiences, to reflect on practice that works and practice that is unhelpful. For some, their developing professional identity is related to their membership of a community where they can interact with one another and recognise each other as participants (Wenger 1998). Spirited debates take place about local and national policy. For example, during a discussion about documenting children's progress:

Highlighting those sheets ... It's so ridiculous. The development matters booklet wasn't meant to be for that ... There's got to be a better way ... (Sadie)

According to Sachs (2003) these types of communities can be forces to be reckoned with but the EYEs are content to focus on their daily work:

I like the reassurance from the group to know I'm on the right track with journals, type of observations. Using that knowledge I can make changes and bring what we do in line with others. (Eleni)

There seems to be untapped potential indicated here, with glimpses of what Sachs (2003) calls the activist professional and which relates to the third theme, 'making a difference'.

Making a difference

This dimension highlights the importance that all of the EYEs, irrespective of their status or role, attached to a sense that they were able to make a difference to the education of young children in their settings; to the families with whom they worked; to practice in their settings and within local communities. The EYEs offered many examples of the ways in which they were actively making a difference and so actively shaping their professional identity as individuals who matter to others.

Kayla, an early years assistant, recounted a story of how she had worked intensively with one little boy over an academic year:

At first he just couldn't socialise and really couldn't cope with lunch time. I sat next to him every day ... encouraging him, modelling what to do. Now he's so different – eats a variety of foods, joins in activities. I saw him and his family in the town recently. So rewarding ... seeing a family happy. I really like that part of the job.

What appears to be significant is that not only were they able to make a difference, but they were able to do this in a way that satisfied their personal and professional values. Sadie explains:

I like teaching in the foundation stage because although you have the framework you can be creative. There's lots of flexibility and you can make decisions yourself about the curriculum, what you feel the children need, your learning environment, how you use the day ...

Changes to EYFS policy, overdue Ofsted inspections and time-consuming assessment paperwork were all mentioned by the EYEs but they did not seem overly anxious about them. Marianne speaks for the majority when she says:

Since 2006 there have been lots of changes. We are always having to move on and change and I'm really happy to do this. I feel there's always another way, something to explore or move on with. I'm really happy to have a go and go for it. Tracy [nursery

nurse] tears her hair out though! I don't see that you can ever stand still ... always something new and if it benefits the children and makes a real difference to them, then I'm happy to go for it.

This comment echoes Brock's (2012) findings that EYEs were able to abide by their core values and beliefs whilst implementing policy and prescribed curricula. Sadie and Maria, both experienced teachers, managed to preserve their professional identity and professional practice as they negotiated imposed changes.

As explained earlier, this study was carried out in preparation for an action-based initiative linked to a doctoral research project. The premise is that those factors EYEs define as influencing professional identity have implications for the ways in which we would aspire to support them through CPD opportunities. The final sections of this article explore the current context for CPD in early years education. We then outline how we might go forward with an alternative approach that draws upon and nourishes their professional identities.

Continuing professional development in early years education

Although the sense of entitlement to CPD is welcome, the recently revised Department for Education statutory framework for the EYFS states the following:

A quality learning experience for children requires a quality workforce. A well-qualified, skilled staff strongly increases the potential of any individual setting to deliver the best possible outcomes for children. (Department for Education 2014, p. 10)

Providers must support staff to undertake appropriate training and professional development opportunities to ensure they offer quality learning and development experiences for children that continually improves. (Department for Education 2014, p. 20)

Disappointingly there is no explicit definition of what constitutes 'quality' and the nature of the training and professional development is not specified further in this statutory document. The focus here is CPD as a key strategy for the implementation of policy. The message about what it is to be a professional in the EYFS in England is implicit but clear. Not only are EYEs expected to provide quality learning experiences, they are charged with ensuring children achieve predetermined, assessable outcomes outlined in the framework. They are construed as technicians. Nina succinctly sums up her position in respect to national and institutional expectations:

I'm not a professional in most people's eyes ... but I have to act like a professional and I have a professional job to do. I have to make sure my 'key' children make their expected progress by the end of the year. I'm accountable.

Professional knowledge and related practices for some appear to be something that can simply be transmitted and put into action with positive effect. The professionalism privileged here has an individualistic focus, the orientation is one of compliant implementation and the drivers are standards, rules and outcomes (Frost 2014). There is no sense of EYEs as active and reflexive agents, no mention of the professional identities they bring with them in terms of their 'individual dispositions and emotions, day-to-day lives and relationships, training and education' (McGillivray 2008, p. 246). This multi-faceted professional identity seems to be at risk.

Reclaiming and reconstructing continuing professional development

We are interested, then, in finding alternative constructions of support for professional development. Some writers describe how the current climate poses challenges and dilemmas for providers of professional development opportunities for the early years workforce (Miller 2008, Ingleby and Hedges 2012). Following our preliminary exploration of early years practitioners' professional identity and their experience of CPD hitherto, we want to identify the features of programmes in which participants would experience being valued, having connections and making a difference. This is echoed in Moyles' statement below:

If we want professionals, then professional understanding itself needs to be nurtured, to be allowed time to develop and opportunity to be applied. Educational improvement depends upon practitioners feeling they WANT to make a difference; upon them feeling empowered and professional. (Moyles 2001, p. 89)

Each of the EYE's stories demonstrates a commitment to making a difference, but their reflections also reveal a sense of frustration with some forms of CPD that they have accessed in the past:

Courses can be a bit hit and miss. I'm not keen on this type of training. It's ok for keeping you current with initiatives or regulations – Letters and Sounds or safeguarding training...but for anything else ... there's very little impact to show. (Colette)

Day courses just depend on the individual trainer. I've become more discerning now ... I don't want a wasted morning. (Marianne)

This sense of frustration is compounded by some educators' sense that aspects of their professional development do not seem to be currently addressed:

What I really want now is some sort of leadership course. I'm leading a team of five. I want something with an Early Years focus. I'm not a born leader and need some input ... (Marianne)

It's the dynamics of the relationships between the team that's hard sometimes. I try hard to articulate and share my understandings and expectations. I'm not always sure how to go about it. (Eleni)

I try to work on impact – bringing ideas back to the setting and working with the whole team to get the initiative on board. The real challenge ... the question for me is how do I get this message across to others when they are busy and I don't want this to be an add on? (Sandra)

These educators are trying to engage with a particular aspect of professionalism, namely leadership, which is frequently disregarded or perceived as an optional extra in the early years education sector (Rodd 1998, Moyles 2001).

Professional development approaches in which the concept of leadership is central are uncommon. Examples in the United States are highlighted in the literature on teacher leadership. One such is the National Writing Project in which teachers empower other teachers to develop their practice, which is firmly focused on 'building capacity to engage in transformation' (Lieberman and Miller 2004, p. 13). Closer to home, the HertsCam Network also embraces the idea of teacher leadership, but the approach adopted there rests on the assumption that it is possible to enable all educators to develop their leadership capacity in ways which suit their circumstances and professional concerns, irrespective of job title or designated role. This non-positional and inclusive approach has enabled many educators to lead

innovation, build professional knowledge, develop their leadership capacity and influence colleagues and practice in their schools, enhancing their professional identity (Frost 2012). In light of the findings of this study, we believe that this approach is an entirely appropriate method for nurturing EYEs' professional identities no matter what their role and supporting them to make a difference to children and families, their colleagues and beyond their own setting.

Our vision is for EYEs to develop an enhanced professionalism in complete contrast to that suggested by the revised framework; one where the focus is collegial and each is a member of a learning community; where the orientation is towards innovation and agential activity; where the drivers are EYEs' principles and moral purposes (Frost 2014). However, the mobilisation of EYEs' enormous potential requires specific support, in terms of planned intervention and dedicated structures, activities and tools to inspire them and enable them to develop this prospective aspect of their professional identities.

Towards transformative professional development

The exploratory study reported here informs the planning of an action-based initiative that will be effective in terms of valuing educators, helping them to forge and make the most of connections with others and supporting them as they make a difference to the lives of children and their families. We recognise the importance of elements such as the following (based on Cordingley *et al.* 2003, Frost 2012):

- belonging to a setting-based group;
- using external expertise linked to school-based activity;
- scope for EYEs to identify their own professional learning focus;
- using tools for reflection and planning and experimentation;
- emphasising peer support;
- processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue;
- processes for sustaining the professional learning over time to enable teachers to embed the practices in their own settings;
- recognition of individual educators' starting points;
- certification through a portfolio of evidence;
- internal support from senior leadership; and
- membership of a wider network of like-minded individuals.

Perhaps this approach would satisfy the needs of EYEs like Sadie, who says:

In an ideal world I would like more head space ... a mentor to talk to ... time to plan, make changes, reflect, think with colleagues and with specialist advice when I need it. Then there would be excitement. CPD wouldn't be an onerous task!

Sadie's comments resonate with our vision for innovation and agential activity. The EYEs here seek professional learning that will empower them not only to transform themselves but to transform their contexts too. We want to support them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. Our use of the term is not to be confused with the recent introduction of the national use of ‘early years educator’ to signify a level 3 qualification meeting specified criteria.

References

- Adams, K., 2005. What’s in a name? Paper presented at the *fifteenth annual conference of the European early childhood educational research association*, 13 September, Dublin, Ireland.
- Bandura, A., 1989. Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American psychologist*, 44 (9), 1175–1184.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P.C., and Verloop, N., 2004. Reconsidering research on teachers’ professional identity. *Teaching and teacher education*, 20 (2), 107–128.
- Benveniste, G., 1987. *Professionalizing the organization: reducing bureaucracy to enhance effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bleach, J., 2014. Developing professionalism through reflective practice and ongoing professional development. *European early childhood education research journal*, 22 (2), 185–197.
- Brock, A., 2012. Building a model of early years professionalism from practitioners’ perspective. *Journal of early childhood research*, 11 (1), 27–44.
- Brubaker, R. and Cooper, F., 2000. Beyond identity. *Theory and society*, 29 (1), 1–47.
- Bruner, J., 1996. *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cameron, C., 2004. *Building an integrated workforce for a long-term vision of universal early education and care*. London: Daycare Trust Policy Paper no. 3.
- Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC), 2006. *Early years professional prospectus*. Leeds: CWDC.
- Cohen, B., et al., 2004. *A new deal for children?* Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Coldron, J. and Smith, R., 1999. Active location in teachers’ construction of their professional identities. *Journal of curriculum studies*, 31 (6), 711–726.
- Connelly, M.F. and Clandinin, D.J., 1999. *Shaping a professional identity: stories of education practice*. London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Cordingley, P., Bell, M., and Thomasen, S., 2003. *The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Creswell, J.W., 2007. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. London: Sage.
- Davies, B., 1989. *Frogs and snails and feminist tales*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008. *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage* [online]. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.
- Department for Education (DfE), 2014. *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage* [online]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335504/EYFS_framework_from_1_September_2014_with_clarification_note.pdf [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998. *Meeting the childcare challenge*. Green paper. London: HMSO.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003. *Every child matters: presented to Parliament by the Chief Secretary to the treasury by command of her Majesty, September 2003*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Egan, B., 2004. Constructing a professional identity: some preliminary findings from early years students. *European early childhood education research journal*, 12 (2), 21–32.
- Erikson, E., 1975. Identity crisis in autobiographic perspective. In: E. Erikson, ed. *Life history and the historical moment*. New York: Norton, 17–47.
- Frost, D., 2012. From professional development to system change: teacher leadership and innovation. *Professional development in education*, 38 (2), 205–227.
- Frost, D., 2014. Keynote address given at the *teacher education advancement annual conference*, 16 May, Birmingham.
- Giddens, A., 1984. *The constitution of society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Hargreaves, A., 2000. Four ages of professionalism and professional learning. *Teachers and teaching: theory and practice*, 6 (2), 151–182.
- Harwood, D., et al., 2013. 'It's more than care': early childhood educators' concepts of professionalism. *Early years*, 33 (1), 4–17.
- Hoyle, E., 2008. Changing conceptions of teaching as a profession: personal reflections. In: D. Johnson and R. Maclean, eds. *Teaching: professionalisation, development and leadership*. London: Springer, 285–304.
- Ibarra, H., 1999. Provisional selves: 'experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation' [online]. *Harvard business school archive*. Available from: <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/1275.html> [Accessed 30 July 2014].
- Ingleby, E. and Hedges, C., 2012. Exploring the continuing professional development needs of pedagogical practitioners in early years in England. *Professional development in education*, 38 (4), 533–549.
- Jenkins, R., 2008. *Social identity*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Lieberman, A. and Miller, L., 2004. *Teacher leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- MacLure, M., 1993. Arguing for your self: identity as an organising principle in teachers' jobs and lives. *British educational research journal*, 19 (4), 311–322.
- MacNaughton, G., 2000. *Rethinking gender in early childhood education*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Maloney, M., 2010. Professional identity in early childhood care and education: perspectives of pre-school and infant teachers. *Irish educational studies*, 29 (2), 167–187.
- McGillivray, G., 2008. Nannies, nursery nurses and early years professionals: constructions of professional identity in the early years workforce in England. *European early childhood education research journal*, 16 (2), 242–254.
- Mead, G.H., 1934. *Mind, self and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, L., 2008. Developing professionalism within a regulatory framework in England: challenges and possibilities. *European early childhood education research journal*, 16 (2), 255–268.
- Moss, P., 2006. Structures, understandings and discourses: possibilities for re-envisioning the early childhood worker. *Contemporary issues in early childhood*, 7 (1), 30–41.
- Moyles, J., 2001. Passion, paradox and professionalism in early years education. *Early years: an international research journal*, 21 (2), 81–95.
- National College for Teaching & Leadership, 2013. *Standards for early years teachers: government response to the consultation on teachers' standards (early years)* [online]. Available from: <https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/EYTS%20Gov%20Response%20Accessible%20FINAL%20v1%200%201007131.pdf> [Accessed 18 February 2015].
- Nias, J., 1989. *Primary teachers talking: a study of teaching as work*. London: Routledge.
- Nutbrown, C., 2012. *Foundations for quality: the independent review of early education and childcare qualifications (Nutbrown Review)* [online]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175463/Nutbrown-Review.pdf [Accessed 18 February 2015].
- Osgood, J., 2006. Deconstructing professionalism in early childhood education: resisting the regulatory gaze. *Contemporary issues in early childhood*, 7 (1), 5–14.
- Osgood, J., 2010. Reconstructing professionalism in ECEC: the case for the 'critically reflective emotional professional'. *Early years: an international research journal*, 30 (2), 119–133.
- Penn, H., 1998. Comparative research: a way forward? In: T. David, ed. *Researching early childhood education: European perspectives*. London: Paul Chapman, 7–24.
- Rhodes, C. and Beneicke, S., 2002. Coaching, mentoring and peer-networking: challenges for the management of teacher professional development in schools. *Journal of in-service education*, 28 (2), 297–310.
- Rodd, J., 1998. *Leadership in early childhood*. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Sachs, J., 2003. *The activist teaching profession*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Skeggs, B., 2003. *Class, self, culture*. London: Routledge.
- Stryker, S. and Burke, P., 2000. The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social psychology quarterly*, 63 (4), 284–297.

- Sylva, K., et al., 2004. *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project: final report: a longitudinal study funded by the DfES 1997–2004* [online]. Available from: <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/5309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf> [Accessed 18 February 2015].
- TACTYC, 2013. *TACTYC response to the teachers' standards (early years)* [online]. Available from: <http://tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/Teacher's%20Standards.pdf> [Accessed 18 February 2015].
- Tajfel, H., 1982. Social psychology of intergroup relations. *Annual review of psychology*, 33, 1–39.
- Tickell, Dame C., 2011. *The early years foundation stage (EYFS) review. Report on the evidence* [online]. Available from: <http://www.education.gov.uk/tickellreview> [Accessed 18 February 2015].
- Wenger, E., 1998. *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Woodrow, C. and Busch, G., 2008. Repositioning early childhood leadership as action and activism. *European early childhood education research journal*, 16 (1), 83–93.