**The impact of Early Years Teachers upon quality: views of managers and  Early Years Teachers**

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**Introduction**

The provision of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has remained firmly on government agendas in recent years (Grauberg, 2014). Once seen simply as a preparation for entry into the school system, it is now apparent that today, our English society’s engagement with the education of the youngest children has finally become a highly political issue.

A compelling amount of research now demonstrates the relationship between the quality of ECEC and the qualifications held by early years practitioners. As a result of this, the Early Years Teacher (EYT) qualification was introduced in 2013. This was the English government’s response to the Nutbrown Review (2012) where attention was drawn to the concern that early years qualifications were not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to give babies and young children high quality experiences.

This article reports on a small study aimed to explore how the new EYT qualification is perceived within the early years sector. From a personal prospective, having numerous placement experiences as a trainee EYT, I was stimulated into considering to what extent do early years managers value the role of the EYT, and how does their understanding of this new qualification enable them to support future EYT's to become effective change agents and raise the overall quality of the workforce? These questions became apparent due to early years managers and practitioners I have worked with expressing their lack of a solid understanding of this new qualification and how it differs from the previous Early Years Professional Status.

Four early years managers were selected to participate in this study. The reason for this was because each manager had recently had a trainee EYT work within their setting and, therefore, their experience and perceptions were considered to be most suited to this research project. In addition, a small sample of EYT's were selected to partake, this enabled a more in-depth analysis of the data to be achieved.

To enable the objectives of this study to be met, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with each manager. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the means of data collection for two primary considerations. First, semi-structured interviews are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and they enable probing for more information and clarification of answers (Barribal and While, 1999). Second, due to the selected sample being small, time was available to enable the interviews to take place with greater flexibility which, in turn, produces richer data (Smith and Osborn, 2007).

Questionnaires were chosen as the data collection method for the EYT's. The reason for this being semi-structured interviews can be time consuming, and with a limited time frame to gain EYT responses, questionnaires were deemed more appropriate. Unlike semi-structured interviews, questionnaires do not provide the researcher with the opportunity to probe further to gain more data. However, as the sample size of participants was small, then qualitative, word-based and open- ended questions were considered to be appropriate to enable participants to give more detailed responses (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

**The role of the EYT**

The DfE (2013) indicates that the role of the EYT is to 'lead education' and meet all of the required teaching standards in practice from birth to the end of the EYFS. They are required to boost quality of care (Parker, 2013), forge positive professional relationships (NCTL, 2013) and be able to support colleagues in order to make effective changes and improve outcomes for children (Lumsden, 2012). To achieve Early Years Teacher Status, trainees are assessed against eight standards which cover the leadership and support of others as well as effective practice across three age ranges, birth-20 months, 16-39 months and 30-60 months (NCTL, 2013).

Even though it seems that professionalising the early years workforce with this new qualification is a positive step made by the English government, the status results in a situation which is confusing for parents and prospective students; some graduates will be trained to teach children from 3-7 years with QTS, whilst others will be trained to teach children birth-5 years with the equivalent of a revised Early Years Professional Status, yet both will be called EYT's. The National Union of Teachers (2013) supports this by stating that the government’s proposals appear to intend to deceive parents and the wider public by calling the new role ‘teacher’ rather than continuing to use the established EYP status.

**The research**

***Overall views and understanding of the EYT qualification***

Each manager was asked what their initial views were of this new qualification. In line with the Nutbrown Review (2012), all four managers within this study acknowledged that any attempt to professionalise the early years workforce is a positive step forward;

Manager: *"The standards aim to equip EYT’s with a sound and secure amount of knowledge which enables them to cascade and support less experienced staff."*

However, three of the managers raised the concern of not fully understanding the role of the EYT, and how it differs from the previous EYP status. Participant 2 stated;

Manager: *"We were not once approached by the government regarding the need and requirements of the EYT and what their responsibilities should be therefore our understanding of the new role was limited."*

Supplementary to this, each EYT within the study was asked if they were clear about the expectations of their new role, in response, all four trainees answered "*No*". Trainee 3 stated;

Trainee: *"I wasn't clear at the beginning of the postgraduate course, and throughout it became even more unclear."*

To gain more clarity, both managers and EYT’s stated that additional information would have been useful:

Manager: *"A more detailed job description of the role of the EYT would have been helpful to enable us to ensure the EYT is fulfilling their role appropriately.”*

Trainee: *"Clearer outcomes and expectations would have improved the course.”*

***Roles and responsibilities given to trainee EYT's***

Each manager was asked what types of roles and responsibilities were given to the trainees to find out if they were given an adequate amount of valuable opportunities to enable them to be effective EYT's within practice. Three of the managers stated that they gave their trainee EYT leadership responsibilities, participant 2 stated:

Manager: *"Opportunities were given to lead under guidance, be involved in all aspects of working within the setting, work with other professionals, be a key worker, and be involved in meetings."*

However, three of the EYT's felt that their placements gave them limited opportunities to take leadership or extra responsibilities:

Trainee: *"I feel like the range of placements was good however due to not understanding the role of the EYT, some settings were not willing to allow as much leadership or responsibility."*

To overcome this, Dugan and Komives (2006) believe that more detailed programmes should be created that work directly with students in the area of leadership development to ensure that each trainee is fulfilling her/his role within placements. In this case, it could be considered necessary to work with the placement setting as well as the student.

***Impact on early years***

In 2012, the DfE highlighted the positive impact EYP's had in supporting workforce development across the sector. Despite the apparent confusion about the role, all four participants believe that the new qualification will continue to have an overall positive impact:

Manager: *"It has given early years a more professional status and it has brought university students into settings with current and up-to-date knowledge."*

Complementary to this, each EYT stated that the training equipped them to become a professional within the early years workforce with the ability to make changes and adapt education and care which is one of the key requirements embedded within the EYT standards (NCTL, 2013).

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## *The relationship between quality and professionalism*

One of the questions within the study aimed to gain an insight into what setting managers believe to be high quality ECEC and what makes a professional within the sector. The responses given from all four participants represent a mixture of skills, knowledge and personal characteristics:

Manager 1: *"Definitely personal qualities and experience - it depends on the individual."*

Manager 2: *"Professional and respectful, lead and support, plan and assess, have good knowledge of the EYFS.”*

Furthermore, three participants strongly emphasised the importance of personal characteristics being more important than qualifications, Manager 3 stated:

*"The qualification will not alone equip students with the skills to run a setting, which is very much based on personal qualities."*

In consideration of this, educators feel they would benefit greatly from knowing the key characteristics of the effective early childhood teacher, as they strive to positively impact the quality of the field. This is supported by Katz (1993) who states that effectiveness as a teacher stems from a combination of knowledge and personal characteristics.

**Discussion**

It has become evident through this small study that the role of the EYT is considered, by these participants, to have an overall positive impact on the sector. They recognise that the standards created for EYT’s provide them with a sound and secure knowledge of the EYFS, therebyenhancing practice, which complements Nutbrown’s (2012) and Sylva *et al* (2004) findings that the quality of provision depends on the knowledge of those within the sector. However, some areas of concern have been identified which have presented some further questions and recommendations. Evidently, both setting managers and EYT's feel that they would benefit greatly from more clarification, information and support regarding the role of the EYT and what their roles and responsibilities should be within settings. This will then enable managers to appropriately support future trainee EYT's within their placement settings, resulting in them raising the overall quality of provision.

In addition, it is apparent that the roles and responsibilities given to trainees are determined by the placement setting. Some placement settings may be unsure of how to support students achieving higher qualifications such as EYT. In consideration of this, it could be deemed necessary for EYT trainees to attend placement settings where the manager has previously undergone EYP training, or at least work with someone within that setting who has achieved the qualification.

Literature clearly demonstrates the relationship between higher level qualifications and the quality of provision. However, based on the responses given, it has clear that each of the participants strongly believe that the quality of provision cannot just depend on people obtaining high qualifications. Overall, it is very much apparent that personal characteristics of the individual are believed to have a major impact on the quality of provision. Literature suggests that characteristics should be embedded within the standards to ensure that the individual not only has the knowledge, but also the motivation and passion to deliver high quality ECEC (Brock, 2009).

It could also be questioned that if the existing EYP's automatically become EYT's, where is the evidence that every EYP would meet the two additional standards (3.4 and 3.5) (NCTL, 2013) aimed to enhance children's phonics and mathematical abilities. In consideration of this, NUT (2013) stated that there is a real danger that the quality of the training will suffer, therefore, not meeting the aim to enhance quality within the sector.

**Limitations of the study**

It is clear that there are some severe limitations within the study. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled a rich amount of data to be collected albeit from only four participants but this, in turn, enabled the aims of this research project to be achieved. However, due to the sample size of participants being small, the research cannot be considered to be generalizable to others working within the sector. Therefore, conducting the research project on a larger scale would increase the validity of the research project.

Additionally another limitation of this study was that it relied solely on questionnaire responses from EYT's due to a limited time frame. If further research was to explore the views of EYT's and the impact the qualification has on the quality of the workforce, methods such as interviews or focus groups would need to be used in addition to a questionnaire. Focus groups are described to yield a collective view rather than an individual one, and are considered to be more appropriate if a large amount of data is needed in a short period of time (Cohen *et al,* 2011).

**Conclusion**

From this small-scale study, we can see that those interviewed felt that the role of EYT is valuable within the workforce and is perceived to have a positive impact on ECEC. Through the process of analysing literature around this topic, along with collecting a rich amount of qualitative data, I have identified some areas of concern including:

* a lack of information given to setting managers regarding the role and requirements of the EYT and how it differs from EYP status;
* confusion relating to the expectations of an YET;
* how the status will impact the quality of provision if previous EYP’s are not required to meet the additional standards.

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