

Dimensions of early years professionalism - attitudes versus competences?

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Being a professional working with young children is not just about meeting standards; it's about attitude, ideology and passion according to my research with a sample of early years educators. Early years practitioners are characterised by their commitment to young children – when they discuss early years issues, their voices are powerful and there is a wealth of expertise and knowledge. Yet historically there have been particular difficulties in the field of early years in defining the nature of professional knowledge, skills and beliefs of its practitioners.

A plethora of initiatives and policy documents have been introduced in this last year that aim to raise the status and qualifications of those working with young children. Osgood (2006:1) proclaims that the UK early years workforce 'is receiving unprecedented attention from policy-makers, economists, mass media and commercial business investors'. She observes that 'the voice of the early years community (including academics, teacher educators, local policy-implementers and practitioners) is small, but the workforce is enormous and continuing to grow' (p1). This has to be good news for early years educators and for young children and their families. Early years requires an articulate, reflexive and highly qualified workforce, since the abilities to evaluate and develop policy and practice are key to its claims to professionalism.

Professionalism is a contemporary issue, acquiring a high profile in education and more recently in early years education and care. However, the emphasis appears to be on deriving a body of standards or competencies that teachers, early years professionals, integrated centre managers need to acquire – rather than what it is to be a professional. It seems that little has been taken into account of the EY professionals themselves – their personalities, relationships, personal ideals, feelings and passion. This reflection for TACTYC draws on the findings from my doctoral research, which was undertaken with a range of respondents who work in early years. I use the phrase 'early years educators' to encompass the range of roles of those who are involved in young children's education. My research aimed to elicit their thinking about their professionalism, to promote recognition

of the complexities of their roles and so contribute to a potential model of early years professionalism.

That there is a need to listen to early years educators' voices to fill in gaps in the perceptions of theorists and to offer indications for policy-makers in the field has now been well established. There have been several consultations organised by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC): the standards for the new Early Years Professional (EYPs); the Early Years Foundation Stage on-line consultation; the new standards for Integrated Centre Leadership and the Transformation Fund implications for Local Authorities. Jane Heywood commenced the CWDC EYPs consultation in Leeds by requesting a 'perfect workforce of the future' to 'get the early years right', that it was a 'political imperative' to have standards that work across all settings. She stated that she wanted early years professionals to be self-valuing and to get a 'buzz' through enjoying working with young children from birth-to-five. These were valuable and essential statements, yet does this enthusiasm emanate through the standards? Are they presented as a body of competencies to be acquired? In my opinion important intrinsic values that should be essential for being a professional working with young children had been omitted. Is passion actually embedded in the standards and is it possible to measure aspects of passion?

Being a professional working with young children, according to the sample of EYEs in my research, is not just about having qualifications, training, skill, knowledge and experience but also about attitudes and values, ideology and beliefs, having a code of ethics, autonomy to interpret the best for children and families, commitment, enjoyment and passion for working with children. It seemed to me that little has been taken into account of these factors in the draft standards. It is essential that professionals working with young children should be *expected* to be committed, enthusiastic, interested and enjoy their work, because this will infect those with whom they work. These are not just the rewards of working with young children, but should be the requisites. EYPs, like the EYEs in my research, should value the personal elements of the relationships with young children and their families, as personal ideals and values are important for professionals. They should be valued for being passionate, and encouraged to be so. These elements must emanate through the standards. CWDC needs to demand this passion not just through listing competencies of what EYPs should perform, but also to research EYEs' voices about what they perceive to be the 'professional' aspects of their work. Whilst representatives of

CWDC assure us that they have consulted EYEs, parents and children and are taking their voices into account, how have these voices been elicited and what depth of elicitation has occurred?

There is no doubt that the majority of us want this passion from those who work with young children. Moyles (2001) debated the issues of passion and paradox as being the essence what we need from professionals working in the early years – that they need opportunities for passionate discussion and debate of critical issues, with time to stand back and engage in discourse at a professional level. We need to access this passion, not just through listing competencies of what professionals in the early years need to be able to perform, but also through on-going listening and eliciting of their thinking; to research their voices and acquire their thoughts on what they perceive to be the ‘professional’ aspects regarding their work with young children.

Smit (2003) advocated that policy-makers should take notice of teachers’ emotional responses and dispositions towards educational changes. The field requires a knowledgeable, highly qualified and articulate workforce and early years professionals, themselves, need to advocate what their own professionalism entails (Moyles, 2001; 2002; Edgington, 2004). The ability to reflect on and evaluate one’s professional role, its practical application and one’s own thoughts about it must be the key to professionalism in the early years. This reflection is clearly an important aspect of the new qualifications.

The need to define professionalism has been a contemporary and contentious issue that has merited the concern of several fields of disciplines – sociology, philosophy, history, management and education. Many draw upon the theories of the sociologist, Friedson, who offered no single explanatory trait or characteristic of professionalism, asserted that it was not a generic concept, but a ‘concrete, changing, historical and national phenomenon’ (Friedson, 1994:7). Helsby (1996: 135) feels that the terms ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ are now often applied with considerable abandon to a wide variety of occupations ‘with elusive and continual reinterpretation of the concepts’. Professionalism is related to proficiency – the knowledge, skill, competence or character of a highly trained individual, as opposed to one of amateur status or capability. There is a clear distinction between ‘being a professional’ which included issues of status, reward, public recognition, and ‘behaving professionally’ which implies dedication, standards of behaviour and a strong

service ethic (Helsby, 1996:138). This all leads to a conclusion, as Aldridge and Evetts (2003: 558) suggest, that being professional is not one, but a cluster of related concepts.

There needs to be clear examination of what components contribute to a model or theory of a professional. A literature search across the fields of philosophy, sociology and education reflecting on professionalism in the disciplines of medicine, law, education and social work revealed common factors and traits cited by the varied theorists, including: Friedson (1994); Hoyle and John (1995); Goodson and Hargreaves (1996; 2003); Frost (2001); GTCE (2001); Zuoyu (2002); Sachs (2003); Winch (2004). These factors can be usefully addressed within the following seven dimensions of professionalism:

- **Knowledge** Specialist knowledge, unique expertise, experience
- **Education and training** Higher education, qualification, practical experience, obligation to engage in CPD
- **Skills** Competence and efficacy, task complexity, communication, judgment
- **Autonomy** Entry requirement, self-regulation and standards, voice in public policy, discretionary judgment
- **Values** Ideology, altruism, dedication, service to clients
- **Ethics** Codes of conduct, moral integrity, confidentiality, trustworthiness, responsibility
- **Reward** Influence, social status, power, vocation

My research sought to allow a small group of EY professionals the chance to articulate their professionalism through a methodology of eliciting teacher thinking, by a range of techniques employed to elicit different aspects to gain a 'holistic' view of their thinking. I then analysed their responses in varied ways, including addressing their professionalism with a context of these seven dimensions. [The outcome is a 'Model of professionalism for an early years educator', which I will email if requested: A.Brock@leedsmet.ac.uk].

Enthusiasm, enjoyment and interest in their work in early years permeated the discourse of my sample. The respondents definitely evidenced Katz's (1969) perceived personal attributes accorded to the teachers of young children, which included flexibility, enthusiasm, warmth and a capacity to encourage and enjoy children (*in* Spodek and Saracho, 2003). The EYEs' strong commitment to their profession, to the field of early

years and to the children themselves, was an overriding perception that I gained during the interviewing. I was not surprised at their level of commitment to early years, as it was what I had come to expect from professionals working with young children. They demonstrated Zembylas' (2003) emotional and personal commitment and Hargreaves and Evans's (1997) ethic of care, showing sustained sense of self and value in their work.

There was a wealth of evidence that my sample gained enormous personal satisfaction. That they enjoyed and were interested in their work was clear, but it was also very important for them that they did so. They were clear about the rewards that they gained through working in early years. They emphasised their passion for education for its own sake and also for enthusing others: '*That's what's wonderful about the job, that you're taking the lid off this wonderful world*'. Moyles (2002) has written about 'passion' being inherent in EY practitioners and it was an issue for my sample, as they all seemed to say that it permeated their lives:

That's traditional of EY people; people I worked with in the PPA had been some of the most passionate people you could get, but I think EY people are normally passionate, imaginative and are willing to give and give and give of their time and energy and expertise to the children. (MWN)

Osgood (2004: 1) affirmed that EYEs are perceived to be committed, investing emotion and personal sacrifice to heightening their professionalism. I, along with Moyles (2001: 81) and Edgington (2004: 5), believe that EYEs should be passionate and forceful in justifying and promoting their beliefs and ideologies. In my opinion the 'passion' must be placed within the standards. I see no problem with assessing enthusiasm or passion through interviewing or observing professionals in whatever situation they are working. I propose that the following aspects need to be embedded when interpreting the standards.

- Values
- Ethics
- Attitudes
- Commitment
- Passion
- Enjoyment
- Enthusiasm

- Play and playfulness

Professionals working in the early years will interpret the standards as they are stated; people will endeavour to meet them exactly – will want to achieve and do their best whether they are either working with children or training and assessing adults. This has definitely been the case in primary education; many teachers ‘conformed’ since the Education Reform Act (1988), even if they did not believe that some of what they delivered was in the best interests of the children they taught. Oberhuemer (2005) observes that prior to state mandated guidelines being introduced that the early childhood curriculum had had professional autonomy, with practitioners making the decisions about practice. She views that whilst early years educators might value the improved status that should emanate from having regulation and standards, they may, on the other hand, feel that adhering to a prescribed framework could undermine their professional autonomy, resulting in more control by policymakers which could contradict ideologies regarding play, learning and care.

In 2005/2006 several conferences have addressed issues of professionalism in the early years. Several educational journals: *Early Years: International Journal of Research and Development*, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Journal* and *Education Review* dedicated their volumes in Spring 2006 to ‘Professionalism’ encompassing a range of issues. The respondents in my study raised these issues several years earlier and I believe they were therefore at the forefront of articulating contemporary professionalism. They were involved in the professional debate: it just needed someone to listen to their voices and analyse their responses. Sylva and Staggs proclaimed at the Early Education conference in March 2006, that there has never been such an important time to ‘stand above the parapet and shout for what you believe in’, as there are still policymakers who do not understand the crucial nature of early years education. The ultimate reward for professionals working with young children would be to see their voices reflected in policy with the results that it makes a real difference to all children.

So, it can be seen that professionalism has a very high profile in 2006, with implications, not just for educators, but also for families, communities, employers and policy-makers. Professionalism in the early years therefore affects many aspects of society. I only hope that the thinking and voices of those concerned are elicited and listened to – continually! Policy makers need to ensure that the voices of the varied professionals working in the

field of early years are sustained, that there is depth in the elicitation and to achieve this they need to be elicited from different perspectives.

HAVE YOUR SAY ...

- **Do you think there is a difference between 'being a professional' and professionalism?**
- **Do you think my seven dimensions of professionalism are appropriate for professionals working in the early years?**
- **Is there an issue with the standards for the new qualifications regarding the emphasis on competence and are the aspects of values etc. missing?**

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