



## The Reflective Professional Within a Workforce in Crisis

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## The Reflective Professional within a Workforce in Crisis

Mandy Duncan

*“So it was that when the man some called the ‘Greatest Man of the Age,’ lay dying in 1965 at the age of ninety, there was but one picture that stood at his bedside. It was the picture of his beloved nanny, gone to be with her Lord some seventy years before. She had understood him, she had prayed him to his best, and she had fueled the faith that fed the destiny of nations ... in the hiddenness of her calling.”* Stephen Mansfield (1996)

It has long been recognised that those who educate and care for young children can have a profound formative influence on their lives. The quote at the beginning of this chapter refers to Elizabeth Anne Everest who was Nanny to Winston Churchill and it illustrates beautifully how, as a culture, we tend to think of work with young children as vocational, a calling. Another example of a formative influence is the deep emotional attachment that Psychoanalyst, John Bowlby formed with his nursemaid Minnie who was his primary caregiver. The separation he experienced on her departure from the household when he was just four years old had a lasting impact on him and was a catalyst for his later work on attachment theory.

Historically, those who worked with young children, usually as nannies or nursemaids, were servants, often unpaid, because food and lodgings were considered to be sufficient remuneration for the work undertaken. The role was considered to be largely a caring one with little thought given to children’s early education. Indeed, until the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was generally held that intelligence was biologically fixed and that experiences had little relevance in the development of children’s cognitive capacities; hence caring for children did not require any specific skills or knowledge and could safely be left to servants (Feeney, 2011). The scientific child study movement and the early work on socialisation began in the late nineteenth century and together these provided us with the realisation that children actively construct knowledge of the world around them through interaction with their environment and social interaction with others. This has had important pedagogical implications for educators who are now perceived to have the means to influence, not just learning and development, but also social conditions and social mobility. The first nursery schools also appeared in the nineteenth century and gradually, over the course of the twentieth century, the importance of education in the early years has been recognised, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The UK has implemented various strategies to encourage participation in early years education and it is now accepted that a highly skilled and qualified early years workforce is needed to provide

high quality education which has a positive impact on children's development and learning and supports them to achieve successful outcomes in life (Sylva et al., 2004).

This is, of course, a very selective potted history, but it does provide a sense that we have already taken huge strides in the journey towards recognition of the contribution that the early years workforce makes to children and society. However, in recent years, the rapid expansion of the government's free early education entitlement, the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic pressures following the outbreak of war in Ukraine have left the early years sector in the midst of a workforce crisis prompting Annabel Denham to write in *The Spectator* in January 2023:

*“Our pre-school and childcare sector is broken. It's unaffordable both for parents and the taxpayer and increasingly inaccessible. Providers are closing at record levels and staff retention is poor.”*

This chapter considers some of the most pressing issues currently facing the early years workforce. It reflects upon the challenges faced by early education providers in recruiting and retaining qualified staff within an undervalued and underpaid workforce. It reflects upon the underfunding of the free early education offer and soaring nursery fees amid the cost-of-living crisis. Finally, it reflects upon the development of professional values and identity within a sector often portrayed in the media as being on the brink of collapse.

## **A Workforce in Crisis [A]**

The UK currently spends under 0.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on early years care and education which is the second lowest of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and indicates a chronic lack of investment in the sector (Hunt & Pound, 2023). This aside, over the last 20 years public spending on early years in England has increased significantly due to the free early education offer for 2, 3 and 4-year-olds (Drayton & Farquharson, 2022). Currently this is comprised as follows:

- All 3 and 4-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours of free early education for 38 weeks of the year until they start school in reception.
- 3 and 4-year-olds in working families are entitled to an additional 15 hours of early education for 38 weeks of the year until they start school in reception.
- The most disadvantaged 2-year-olds (around forty percent) are entitled to 15 hours of early education for 38 weeks of the year.

In addition, working families on Universal Credit are eligible for reimbursement of up to 85% of their childcare and education costs and working families who are not on Universal Credit can access tax-free childcare and education through an opt-in system. In total, at the time of writing, the UK government funds around fifty percent of all early education places in

England. However, in 2023, the government announced that all working parents of children aged over 9 months will be entitled to 15 hours of free early education from 2024 increasing to 30 hours of free early education from 2025. This means that by 2025 the government will be funding around eighty percent of all early education places and the sector will need an estimated 38,000 more workers to support this (Hunt & Pound, 2023). This will require significant forward planning and adequate resourcing in order to ensure that the workloads and stress levels of those already working in the sector are not stretched to the point where they are unable to meet the needs of the children in their care.

The expansion of the free early education offer has already placed huge demands on providers leaving many struggling to survive. Staffing is the most significant cost for most early childhood education and care providers, accounting for around three quarters of total costs (DfE, 2019). Rises in the minimum wage and rises in pension and National Insurance contributions have increased pressures on providers, and the cost-of-living crisis has meant that they are also facing rises in operational costs such as energy bills, business rates, food prices and learning resources. Ninety-five percent of providers report that the government funding does not cover the cost of providing 3 and 4-year-old places and seventy-nine percent report that it does not cover the cost of 2-year-old places (National Day Nurseries Association, 2021). The resulting financial strain on providers has been a key driver in nursery closures. This situation was undoubtedly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic which saw the closure of most early years settings to all children other than the most vulnerable and children of key workers. As a result, over a third of private nurseries had gone into deficit by 2021 and many had to take actions such as cutting staff, reducing employment contracts, and reducing the number of state-funded places in order to remain financially viable (Hardy et al., 2022). In 2022, forty percent of local authorities in England reported a sharp increase in nursery closures with eighty-eight percent expecting more to close in 2023 (Hunt & Pound, 2023). This trend has continued and the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) reported that the number of nursery closures between September 2022 and September 2023 was fifty percent higher than in the previous year and the number of providers registered with Ofsted fell by 8% in the period from 2021 to July 2023 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023). For those providers that have survived, chronic underfunding of the free entitlement has made it challenging for them to offer competitive wages and many early years workers are being paid close to the minimum wage resulting in difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

### **The Impact on Children and Families [A]**

Cost is a significant factor for many families, particularly those who are not entitled to the free early education offer and those whose requirements exceed their free entitlement. However, according to Farquharson (2023) six in ten parents have not heard of tax-free childcare which could potentially provide a subsidy of up to twenty-five percent for the vast

majority of working families. State support for early years childcare and education in England is so complicated that it is difficult for many parents to understand and access what they are entitled to. The price of early childhood education and care is highest for the youngest children due to the high staff to child ratios required for children under two leaving parents struggling to find affordable high-quality provision. This situation is further exacerbated because private nurseries find themselves having to supplement the government's underfunding of the free entitlement by increasing fees for unfunded places.

Access to high quality affordable childcare and education is particularly important for children from low-income families as it enables parents to work and earn whilst simultaneously supporting children's development, learning and social outcomes. However, according to an Ofsted (2023) report on international early years provision, the UK has some of the most expensive childcare in Europe. A survey by the charity Pregnant then Screwed (2023) found that childcare and education is prohibitively expensive for many parents with more than three quarters of respondents stating that it does not make financial sense for them to work and twenty-six percent of those using childcare stating that the cost is greater than seventy-five percent of their take home pay. These challenges are faced equally by early years practitioners who are also parents and there are many examples of parents leaving work in the sector after parental leave because their salary would not cover the cost of their childcare (Bonetti, 2020).

Many families will welcome the government's plans to expand the free early education offer to children aged over nine months; however, the announcement comes at a time when it is broadly acknowledged that the early years workforce is experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis and therefore serious questions have been raised regarding the viability of providing these additional places (Sakr et al., 2023). A report by the Early Years Alliance (2021) found that eighty-four percent of providers struggle to recruit suitably qualified early years staff with forty-nine percent having to limit places due to staff shortages. Only eighteen percent of Local Authorities in England have enough childcare places for children with disabilities (Jarvie et al, 2023). Furthermore, since the pandemic there has been a six percent reduction in the number of providers offering free early education places due partly to the increase in nursery closures, but also due to the increasing number of providers who have reduced their free places in order to remain financially viable (Jones et al., 2023). This raises serious questions about whether the quality of provision can be maintained during the expansion.

High quality early childhood care and education depends upon a highly qualified workforce. However, free early education places are increasingly being delivered by staff with no qualifications such as unpaid volunteers and apprentices. This undermines the status of the qualified workforce and can have serious implications for children's development and attainment levels (Jones et al., 2023). According to DfE (2023) the proportion of staff without an early years qualification has increased from 17% in 2020 to 21% in 2023. Many

practitioners within privately owned day nurseries perceive career progression to be problematic because settings are increasingly choosing to employ newly qualified staff or trainees rather than highly qualified and experienced practitioners who cost more and have a bigger impact on profit margins (Hunt & Pound, 2023). This is making the workforce increasingly unstable with the number of qualified new entrants insufficient to replace those leaving the sector. If this situation continues, it is difficult to see how children's development, learning and outcomes will be unaffected (Bonetti, 2020). Young children have already been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 lockdowns which left many children disadvantaged in their communication, language, physical, social, and emotional development. Thirteen percent fewer four and five-year-olds met expected levels of development in 2021 compared to the year before the pandemic (Tracey et al., 2022). According to Ofsted (2022) children's recovery from the pandemic has been slowed by the early years workforce crisis which has continued to affect their educational experiences, security, and stability.

### **An Undervalued and Underpaid Workforce [A]**

According to Lyndon (2022) many early years practitioners experience in-work poverty due to the low pay and status associated with the highly gendered early years workforce. Sixty-two percent of early years practitioners earn less than the real living wage and on average they earn only fifty-six percent of the median wage for all workers. Almost half of the early years workforce claim benefits to top up their income (Bonetti, 2019) and more than a quarter of children with an early years worker for a parent are growing up in poverty (Hunt & Pound, 2023). High staff turnover rates and difficulties attracting qualified practitioners undermine the continuity and stability of care and education provided to young children, however, the increasing financial pressures on providers hinders their ability to improve pay and working conditions). This has led Nutbrown (2021) to argue that there is a workforce policy crisis in England which has left the sector struggling to recruit and retain qualified staff. Evidence for this argument is also provided by Hunt & Pound (2023) who found that ninety-five percent of Local Authorities in England have difficulty recruiting appropriately skilled and qualified staff with practitioners leaving the profession in unprecedented numbers. According to DfE (2023) the early years workforce lost the equivalent of 12,009 Level 3 qualified staff and 1,539 degree qualified staff between 2020 and 2023. This is due to a variety reasons including low pay, long hours and lack of recognition of the highly skilled work early years practitioners undertake which has had a huge impact on their morale, leaving practitioners feeling demotivated and devalued (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023). A survey by the Early Years Alliance (2021) found that thirty-five percent of respondents were considering leaving the sector often to work in the retail or hospitality sectors where jobs were perceived to pay more, have lighter workloads and be less stressful.

[Start box here]

### **Team Talk – The Early Years Recruitment and Retention Crisis [B]**

The following quotes have been taken from the Early Years Alliance (2021) report ***Breaking Point. The Impact of Recruitment and Retention Challenges on the Early Years:***

*“Why would anyone go into the early years sector? The pay is poor, the terms and conditions of employment are poor, the prospect of increased pay is unlikely, the demands placed on people who work in the sector are extremely high and we are treated with a lack of respect.”*  
(p6)

*“You can earn more working at McDonald's without all the added paperwork and pressure.”*  
(p8)

*“I am very sad to be considering leaving this sector but I am tired of unrealistic demands and insufficient funding.”* (p10)

*“We are just about doing [the] basics so we don't burn out [remaining] staff who are qualified and reliable. This means the extras that make us excellent have had to go.”* (p19)

*“We have had the same manager for 25 years who has continually battled to keep us open. It is so sad to see how demoralised she is about the current situation and daily we see the fight in her wane. So many staff like her are walking away from the early years.”* (p21)

#### **Some team discussion points:**

Do these quotes resonate with you as a team?

What recruitment and retention challenges is your setting currently facing?

What do you think are the most common reasons for staff leaving the sector?

How do/might staff shortages impact the quality of provision?

What needs to happen to change this situation?

What can you do as a team to keep staff morale high and support each other during challenging times?

[End Box here]

Politically, early years education is often described and promoted as ‘childcare’ and its primary purpose is perceived to be supporting parents to work. This means that the hours practitioners are expected to work often extend beyond the school day which is the norm in other phases of the education system. This is further complicated by the multiple types of

maintained, private, voluntary, and independent settings that exist within the early years sector where sixty-five percent of all group-based childcare and education settings are run by private providers (Hunt & Pound, 2023). Despite the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) in 2008 and its stated aim of ensuring that all children aged from birth to five, whatever type of setting they attend, receive high quality education and care, there is still a cultural perception that education begins when children reach 3-4 years of age and prior to this they only need care while their parents go to work. As a consequence, successive governments have invested more public funding in the maintained sector which largely consists of nursery and reception classes in school settings and this has led to inequalities for those working with young children in private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings. This has created a two-tier system within which those who work in PVI settings are often paid less, work longer hours, have a lower level of qualifications, and have a perceived lower status than those who work in maintained settings (Bonetti, 2019). The low rates of pay within the private sector means that those with higher qualification levels are discouraged from working within it preferring the comparatively higher rates of pay and better working conditions found in the maintained sector. According to Basford (2019) this has led to division and mistrust between those who work in the maintained and PVI sectors where this discourse effectively defines those practitioners who 'can' and those who 'cannot'.

Young working-class women are overrepresented in the early years workforce compared to the labour market in general. Forty-one percent of the workforce are less than thirty years of age (Hunt & Pound, 2023) and despite efforts to attract men to careers in early years, the workforce remains highly female dominated; ninety-seven percent of group-based early years educators and ninety-nine percent of childminders are women (Kulakiewicz et al., 2022). This has important implications for the way work with young children is perceived by the general public and for working conditions within the sector. The UK's patriarchal legacy means that childcare is still very much perceived to be women's work and early years is not viewed as a man's profession. This, combined with poor pay and working conditions, means that it is difficult to attract men to work in the sector. Increasing the number of males in the workforce might help early years to begin to be perceived as a male profession which paradoxically could increase its status within society and help address the recruitment crisis.

Within the literature, relatively little attention has been given to improving the working conditions of the early years workforce. There tends to be low levels of unionisation within the sector and early childhood educators are not usually represented by teaching unions unless they have QTS. According to Bonetti (2020) this has led to a lack of support to improve conditions within a workforce that is unaware of their rights and greater unionisation would bring more opportunities for negotiation of pay and working conditions. Working conditions are an important consideration because they influence job satisfaction and the ability of practitioners to provide a high-quality service which affects their self-efficacy and self-esteem. Working conditions include factors such as workload, working



hours, staff to child ratios, stress levels, and experiences of leadership and management. Within the early years sector workloads are often high and include extensive paperwork which many practitioners complete in their own time because of the difficulties involved in completing administrative duties and planning when children are in the setting and require attention. High staff to child ratios can mean that it is difficult to support children with additional needs adequately and reduces opportunities to discuss and reflect upon practice which can mean that improvements and new initiatives are not implemented. Those in senior positions often have a high levels of responsibility which is not commensurate with the relatively low levels of pay e.g., responsibility for EYFS compliance, responsibility for safeguarding requirements, management of staff and the additional pressures associated with Ofsted inspections. Working conditions are often perceived to be better in maintained settings due to shorter opening hours and the longer school holidays. Childminders in particular can face additional challenges which are specifically related to being self-employed such as instability of income, not receiving holiday pay or sick pay, difficulties separating work and home life and lack of support when undergoing Ofsted inspections. All of this can have a negative effect on health and wellbeing causing exhaustion, anxiety and low morale (Bonetti, 2020).

Despite all of this, early years practitioners report having higher levels of happiness than the working population in general (Bonetti, 2020) and those who work in early years tend to see the job as a vocation. This means they are often intrinsically motivated by the job itself and find the work rewarding, gaining satisfaction from the enjoyment they get from working with young children and the feeling that they are making a difference to children's lives. Extrinsic factors such as pay and status are therefore sometimes seen as less important and this makes early childhood practitioners an easily exploited group. However, the work can also be stressful and emotionally demanding, often requiring hours of work that are not remunerated in order to provide a high quality service, and this can lead to depression and burnout particularly among younger practitioners who might ultimately decide to leave the profession for less-stressful work (Cameron & Moss, 2020).

The pandemic was a particularly demanding time for many practitioners who were classed as essential workers and who found themselves taking on additional roles such as providing washing facilities, organising food deliveries, supporting parents with benefits and financial advice, and expanded safeguarding responsibilities due to reductions in the services of outside agencies. However, the government and media focus was firmly on schools during this period despite the fact that many early years settings were operating under the same difficult conditions. For example, private nurseries did not receive personal protective equipment and testing facilities in the same way that schools did leaving them feeling marginalised and devalued despite higher risks from the virus due to the difficulties of social distancing and mask wearing when caring for babies and very young children. The vast majority of early years practitioners feel undervalued and under respected within society particularly by politicians and policy makers and this was the case even prior to the

pandemic (Arnerich, 2022). This has a huge impact on their motivation and aspirations to continue a career within the sector particularly in the post pandemic period where many practitioners are now struggling to support children to recover lost speech, language, physical, social, and emotional development amid a huge backlog in referrals for children needing support for special educational and other support needs.

Early years practitioners play a vital role in supporting young children's development, learning and long term outcomes. The need to be recognised and valued for their skills, knowledge, expertise, and the important contribution they make to society is likely to be fundamental to solving the problem of retention within the sector because they are already motivated and gain satisfaction from the job itself. Formally recognising the critical role that early years practitioners play in supporting educational, social, and economic outcomes will help to enhance cultural perceptions of the value of early years work and situate it as a valuable, respected and rewarding career.

### **Early Years Workforce Development: Quality, Qualifications and Continuing Professional Development [A]**

The UK has undergone notable changes in its approach to early years workforce development over the past two decades. Initially the focus was on improving the quality of practice and the labour government's approach at the beginning of the millennium reflected a growing awareness of the importance of early years education. One notable early initiative was the Sure Start programme which aimed to improve child outcomes in disadvantaged areas, providing comprehensive support to families by bringing services for children together including early education. While the programme recognised the importance of early years education, its focus on workforce development was not as prominent. However, the sector faced challenges related to inconsistent standards in the qualifications required for working with young children which varied considerably leading to inconsistencies in the quality and effectiveness of the early education provided. Debates about quality resulted in increased expectations of the early years workforce and the *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES, 2005) recognised the importance of creating a workforce rich with opportunities for practitioners to build their knowledge and skills and develop rewarding careers.

Recruitment and retention were already seen as key challenges to achieving this ambition, along with the need to develop a coherent suite of qualifications and training pathways to enable progression, promote stronger leadership and improve job satisfaction. Early Years Foundation Degrees were introduced as part of these broader efforts to enhance quality with the intention that this would create a Senior Practitioner role, however, this was never recognised in terms of pay and status and it was eventually reconceptualised and replaced by the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (Vardy, 2022). EYPS was a Level 6 qualification which was intended to be broadly equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). However, this turned out to be a confused attempt at professionalising the workforce as those with

EYPS were not able to teach in schools because the status was not deemed to be equivalent to QTS. According to Cameron & Moss (2020) this was a pivotal moment which could potentially have led to real structural reform resulting in a highly qualified, integrated, and unified children's workforce. However, the reality was very different with any sense of a unified workforce being lost and the gulf between the graduate teachers in the maintained sector and the 'childcare' workers in the PVI sector became wider than ever.

The second decade of the millennium witnessed a series of targeted policies and legislative changes aimed at enhancing the quality of early childhood education with the issue of professionalisation of the workforce taking centre stage. The government had acknowledged the role that highly qualified practitioners played in supporting positive outcomes for children and introduced new measures to improve qualifications. Dame Cathy Nutbrown was a prominent advocate for raising qualification levels within the early years workforce during this time and her influential report, the Nutbrown Review (2012), critically examined the state of early years education and made recommendations to enhance the professionalisation of the early years workforce, emphasising the need for a highly qualified workforce and recommending the move towards a graduate-led workforce. She emphasised the importance of higher education arguing that higher qualifications are associated with a deeper knowledge and understanding which contributes to more informed and reflective practice among practitioners. Following the review, Early Years Professional Status was replaced by Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) which brought with it a new set of teacher standards and strong expectations of accountability. Following this, the national Early Years Educator (EYE) qualification was introduced setting occupational standards for Level 3 and the requirement for EYE's to have GCSE or equivalent maths and English qualifications to count within the EYFS staff to child ratios was introduced.

There was some criticism within the sector of the shift in emphasis to accountability and standards amid fears that practitioners would become performative and policy compliant (Murray & McDowall Clark, 2013). Basford (2019) argues that although the new qualifications have elevated the position of practitioners somewhat, particularly within the PVI sector, they still have limited voice to influence policy because of the necessity to adopt dominant and centrally imposed assumptions, competencies, and attributes in order to continue to be recognised and maintain authority within the field. In addition, early years teachers are still perceived to have a lower status than teachers in other phases of the education system. This is largely due to the fact that they often have lower qualification levels than teachers in primary and secondary education and although those with EYTS can be employed to teach in school reception and nursery classes, they do not enjoy the same pay and conditions as teachers with QTS. In addition, Early Years Teacher led provision in the PVI sector remains an aspiration rather than a requirement (Archer, 2022). There has been a growing recognition among the workforce that obtaining a higher-level qualification such as a degree does not necessarily lead to an increase in pay or status leaving some practitioners questioning the value of higher qualifications and wondering whether it is a

worthwhile investment for them in terms of the time and cost (Early Years Workforce Commission, 2021).

[Start box here]

### **Evidence Informed Research, Practice and Reflection [B]**

#### **Early Years Qualifications Framework (Nutbrown, 2021) [B]**

Despite the considerable reform in qualifications over the last two decades, career pathways within early years are generally perceived to be confusing with practitioners holding a wide array of different qualifications depending on when they trained. Nutbrown (2021) points out that there is no shared nomenclature for roles within early years and some job titles are used to refer to a range of occupations which require similar qualifications and responsibilities, for example; teaching assistant, childcare worker, early years practitioner, nursery worker, childminder and early years educator. These are all roles which require the same specialised skills, knowledge, responsibilities, values, and attributes but can differ substantially in terms of pay, working conditions and contracts. The establishment of a unifying title might help to define early years workers as professionals and support the development of a shared professional identity.

Nutbrown (2021) has presented a framework for professional early years qualifications which is specifically designed to address the current challenges of recruitment and retention within the early years sector, providing progression routes for practitioners and raising the status of early years careers. She argues that the lack of government support for professionalising the early years workforce impacts on the quality of practice within early years settings. She has also drawn attention to the tensions between government policy and early years pedagogical values arguing that the pressures of inspection are effectively restricting children's opportunities to reach their potential.

**Reflect upon Nutbrown's proposed qualifications framework:**

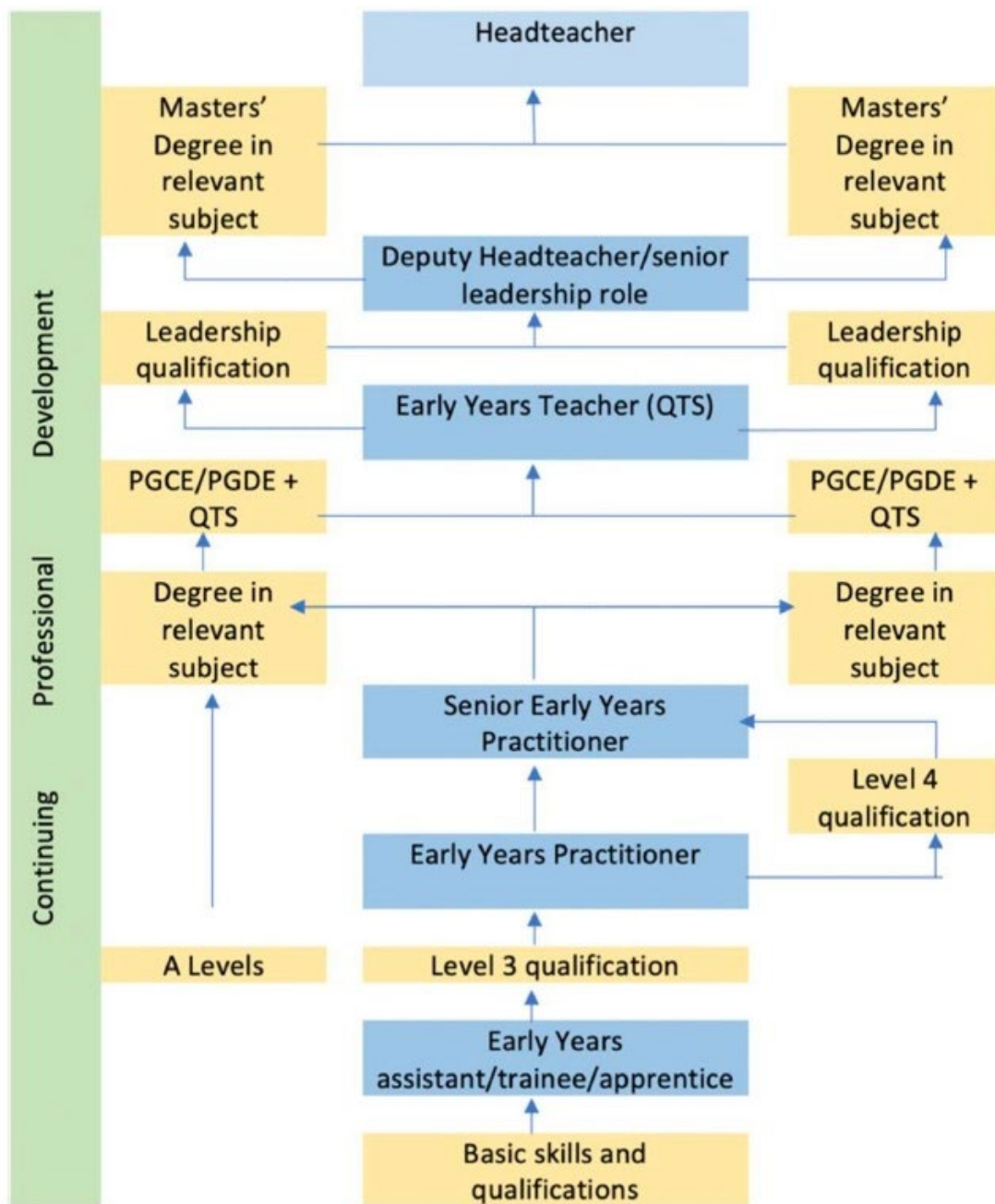


Figure 1: Early Childhood Education career progression structure and qualifications.  
Source: Nutbrown (2021)

- What contribution might this make to recognising the value of those who make up the early years workforce?
- What are the implications of this framework for:
  - Those who work in the maintained sector?
  - Those who work in the PVI sector?

- Holding a degree up to Masters level might help to make the argument that early childhood educators are highly qualified professionals. However, what are the implications for practitioners who are in home based settings?
- What opportunities does this framework offer for unifying the early years workforce?

[End box here]

As you will have noticed, Nutbrown's framework is not solely focused on academic qualifications; there is also recognition of the value of continuing professional development (CPD) as integral components of practitioner's knowledge and skills. This aligns with broader ideas about professionalism being a combination of academic knowledge, practical skills, reflective practice, and a commitment to ongoing learning. It also aligns with the broader aspirations of the sector to have an approach to early years workforce development which is comparable with highly regarded international models. Countries like Finland and Sweden, for example, are known for their successful early childhood education systems which prioritise highly qualified educators, competitive salaries, and a strong focus on continuous professional development.

The government's latest *Early Years Workforce Strategy* (DfE, 2017) chose to address the workforce retention crisis by focusing primarily on supporting staff to achieve their career goals through the creation of clear career pathways and increased CPD opportunities. However, this has not been supported with sustained investment and it clearly ignores the elephant in the room which is the need to raise pay and working conditions. That said, CPD is an important component of professionalism because it helps to ensure that practitioners continue to be competent in their practice and keep up to date with new knowledge and developments in the field. It demonstrates commitment to the profession and can provide practitioners with the confidence to undertake new initiatives or deal with complex situations. Moyles (2001) advocates that practitioners should engage in continuous reflection and learning to stay abreast of the latest research and pedagogical advancements and to enable them to adapt their practices to meet the evolving needs of children and ensure a responsive and effective educational experience.

### **Developing a Professional Identity [A]**

According to Georgeson et al (2022) there is a general lack of understanding of the nature of professionalism within the early years sector and early years work is not highly esteemed. Working with young children is often perceived to be little more than changing nappies, wiping noses, and playing. It is not regarded as a profession that requires specialised

knowledge and expertise and this presents a barrier to improvements in pay, status and working conditions. If improvements are to occur, a much more explicit recognition of the often challenging roles and responsibilities of those who work with young children is needed (Nutbrown, 2021). Bonetti (2019) argues that a collective professional identity can only emerge if practitioners actively contribute to the establishment of a professional voice and advocate for the recognition of their expertise. Egan (2004) highlights the role of storytelling in shaping professional identity arguing that early years practitioners construct their professional identity through the narratives they share about their experiences, challenges, and successes. Recognising and sharing these stories not only enhances professional learning but also contributes to the collective identity of the early years workforce.

[Start box here]

### Team Talk - The Seven Dimensions of Professionalism (Brock, 2012) [B]

Avril Brock's (2012) research identified a typology of professionalism within early years which is made up of seven inter-related dimensions of professionalism:

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

	Commitment to professional values and vocation built on moral and social purposes Accountability to the client group of children and families
<b>Ethics</b>	Ethical principles and engaging with values regarding young children's education and care High level of commitment to professional role and to children and families Collaboration with colleagues in the setting and other professionals Inclusiveness whilst valuing diversity in working relationships with children, families and communities Self-regulating code of ethics applied to everyday working practice
<b>Reward</b>	Personal satisfaction, interest and enjoyment in working with young children Strong and supportive relationships with young children and their families Strong commitment for the professional role and to personal professionalism Being valued and gaining acclaim for professional expertise Financial remuneration through appropriate salary

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

Source: Brock (2012)

- Use the seven dimensions of professionalism to reflect on your own professional identity as an early childhood practitioner
- Create your own personal narrative of what being an early years professional means to you.
- As a team, discuss your narratives and use them to support development of a strong collective professional identity as an early years community.

[End box here]

Professional identity is a complex construct encompassing an individual's sense of belonging, values, beliefs, and the recognition of their role within a particular professional community. Those who are regarded as professionals generally occupy a role within society which is valued and highly regarded. In the context of the early years workforce, professional identity goes beyond job responsibilities and qualifications. It encapsulates the practitioner's understanding of their unique contributions to children's development and goes beyond the acquisition of technical skills to encompass a deep understanding of the principles that guide effective teaching and learning. Moyles (2001) emphasises the importance of reflective practice as a cornerstone of professionalism in early childhood education underscoring the significance of practitioners critically examining their practices, beliefs, and values to enhance the quality of care and education they provide. Brock (2012) also emphasises the role of reflective practice in professional identity formation stating that reflective practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-examination, critically assessing their beliefs, values, and actions. Through this process, early years professionals not only enhance their effectiveness but also contribute to the ongoing evolution of their professional identity. This reflective approach allows practitioners to align their practice with the best interests of the children and families they serve. The quality of the relationships established by practitioners with children and families which are based on trust, collaboration, and a deep understanding of individual children's needs, is also central to their professional identity.



The development of a professional identity is a dynamic process which is strongly influenced by personal values and experiences. Lightfoot and Frost (2015) argue that professional identity is inextricably intertwined with personal identity and is unique for everyone depending on their individual circumstances and experiences. It therefore follows that professional identity formation is not a fixed state but an ongoing process of assimilation and interpretation of new circumstances and experiences. There are a multitude of factors that influence this process including society, education policy, media, and individual feelings such as self-efficacy. This makes the idea of a single shared early years professional identity problematic particularly given the myriad of roles and settings occupied by early years workers. According to Brock (2012), a strong early years professional identity is grounded in a commitment to ethical practice, continuous reflection, and a genuine understanding of the diverse needs of children and families. However, she argues against a one-size-fits-all approach encouraging practitioners to recognise and celebrate their individual strengths and talents as this contributes to the construction of a positive professional identity that is authentic and empowering.

Murray & McDowall Clark (2013) emphasise the impact that the political landscape has on the professional identity of the early years workforce. Policies, regulations, and frameworks provide the context within which practitioners operate and therefore, understanding and navigating this landscape is a key way in which practitioners shape their identities in accordance with the broader expectations and goals set by the sector and society. Cameron & Moss (2020) conceptualise early childhood practitioners as existing within the dominant political ideology of neoliberalism which has marketisation, efficiency and accountability as central foci and views children and practitioners in terms of economic investments for the future. The inequalities experienced by practitioners in the PVI sector and the retention and recruitment crisis are both illustrative of the challenges of providing early years education against a neoliberal backdrop. This also has implications for the formation of professional identity because early years practitioners are simultaneously constructed as the cause of the deficit in quality and standards and also the solution to this problem (Archer, 2022). An example of this is the government's 'optional' relaxing of the staff to child ratios for two-year-olds from September 2023. This places responsibility for breaking out of the cycle of high nursery fees and low pay at the feet of practitioners who are then faced with the dilemma that taking this option might reduce the quality of care and education they can offer. On the one hand, government guidance, standards, policies, and legislation work to define quality and shape the practice of early years practitioners with Ofsted inspecting the performance of quality and ensuring compliance despite the inadequate levels of funding to support this. On the other hand, early childhood practitioners are framed as highly reflective and self-evaluative, constantly seeking to make improvements in their practice. Ironically, they are restricted in this endeavour through the prescribed policies and standards that work to simultaneously enable and constrain them and this has implications for their agency, autonomy, and pedagogical choices.

## **Agency, Autonomy and Acts of Resistance [A]**

According to Sims (2017) within neoliberal discourse there is an assumption that quality and standards are best assured by top-down regulation, standardisation, and monitoring. This is evident in the UK in the Ofsted registration requirements and inspection framework; the introduction of a standardised curriculum; the progress check at age two; the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) which provides evidence that children have achieved the Early Learning Goals (ELGs); and the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) which provides a point from which to measure progress through primary school. Regulation has been seen by some as problematic in that it can lead to a narrow overfocus on providing evidence for the assessments and consequently, learning that is not readily aligned to these can be undervalued. This can be at odds with the stated values of early years educators in supporting the holistic development of children and valuing them for their strengths as individuals. It also undermines practitioners professionalism, agency, and autonomy by removing decision making power and encouraging compliance and performativity (Basford, 2019). This can be particularly disempowering for graduate early years professionals and teachers who work in PVI settings and find themselves subject to structural inequalities which mean that their pay and working conditions are not as favourable as those working in maintained settings. Professional insecurity can result which is problematic because it is not just professional knowledge that is needed to challenge the status quo but high levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. As Moyles (2001) points out:

*It is difficult to fight for what one believes in if one has a relatively fragile self-concept and self-confidence, and easy to give up and simply to do as one perceives one is 'told' by politicians and parents (p87).*

According to Dyer (2022) early years practitioners expressions of agency are limited and there is often a tension between their fundamental values as educators of young children and the requirements of policy and regulation. For example, successive neoliberal governments have viewed children as economic investments for the future and so early years education has become focused on 'school readiness' which is often associated with a narrowing of the curriculum and use of pedagogies that are inappropriate for young children in order to ensure success when they transfer to primary school. The accountability pressures that ensue from this can create a tension for early years practitioners who value a play-based pedagogical approach as a fundamental mode of learning for young children, enabling them to explore, experiment, and make sense of the world around them. Basford (2019a) argue that early years practitioners have been turned into 'policy puppets' (p780) who increasingly find themselves pushed and pulled by various policy initiatives they do not agree with but are unable to make a stand or speak out against.

[Start box here]

## **Team Talk - Policy Puppets or Resistance Fighters? [B]**

An example of where some practitioners felt they had been turned into policy puppets is found in the case of the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA). The RBA was introduced in primary schools in England for children in reception classes from September 2021. The RBA is a statutory test for attainment in mathematics, literacy, communication and language and provides the starting point for schools to measure the progress they make with their pupils from this point until the end of key stage 2. Bradbury (2019) discusses early years teachers compliant resistance to the introduction of this unpopular policy which was viewed as another sign of them not being trusted as professionals. The RBA is contested on the basis that it draws practitioners away from supporting children's learning through play-based pedagogy in order to ensure that children are prepared for the assessment. The assessment itself is very time-consuming and also distracts practitioners from engaging in play-based learning. This is an example of where there is a clear tension between early years values and the neoliberal testing and accountability ideology. Even though the RBA is technically being complied with, Bradbury argues that this is an example of early years practitioners 'doing without believing' and goes on to state that 'compliant resistance' is part of the professional identity of early years professionals.

### **Some team discussion points:**

What are your thoughts on this?

What aspects of practice and policy enactment do you do without believing?

Would you describe yourselves as policy puppets or resistance fighters? Can you think of some examples?

What does this say about your identity as early years professionals?

[End box here]

Archer (2022) argues that professional identity becomes normalised through workforce policies which dictate the knowledge, skills, and attributes which government decides are desirable for those working with young children to have. Although these policies might be contested initially, the workforce absorbs the standards they set out and eventually stops questioning them. Gradually these standards come to dominate and are not questioned but instead become viewed as the ideal. In this way, policies can be viewed as coercive as they promote a particular view of the early childhood practitioner and a consequence of this is the suppression of practitioner autonomy. Basford (2019) argues that creating discursive spaces where teams can collaborate and reflect helps practitioners to resist conforming to practices that are not in line with their fundamental values as educators of young children. Together they can transgress ideological boundaries, build the confidence and capacity to stand up for what they believe to be the most appropriate pedagogical approaches for

educating young children and construct a unified professional identity underpinned by clearly stated values.

### **Chapter Reflections [A]**

The early years sector is currently facing a range of challenging issues including difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff within an undervalued and underpaid workforce which is often portrayed as being on the brink of collapse. An inherent problem is that the sector is made up of a complex mix of maintained, private, voluntary and independent providers. This has resulted in inequalities in pay, working conditions, qualifications and status and has led to division and mistrust within the workforce. The government's free early education offer is chronically underfunded leaving many nurseries in financial difficulties and consequently having to reduce the number of free places they offer. In addition, the range of free and subsidised entitlements is so complicated that it is difficult for parents to navigate and understand what they are entitled to.

Having multiple types of provider and childcare support programmes undoubtedly makes it more difficult for policy makers to intervene with a coherent vision for reform. However, the expansion of the new free early education entitlement to babies over 9-months from 2024 provides a key opportunity for the government to invest in the early years workforce and support the growth of a professionalised, valued and respected workforce. Well-qualified, experienced and passionate early childhood practitioners are the cornerstone of any high-quality early years education provision and it is now widely acknowledged that they can have a profound influence on children's development, learning and outcomes in life. However, there is unlikely to be a resolution to the early years workforce crisis until there is full recognition and value placed upon the role that early years practitioners play in society and this must include reform of pay, working conditions and status within the sector.

Professionalism, grounded in reflective practice and a commitment to continuous learning will help to ensure that practitioners are well-equipped to navigate the evolving political landscape of early years education. The process of professionalisation of any workforce involves the clear communication of specialised knowledge, skills, and ethical standards within the particular field. A clear articulation of career pathways and associated qualifications is also important to ensure that higher qualifications lead to defined roles and career progression opportunities which are recognised in terms of pay and status. There is a growing body of contemporary research which supports this and which is attempting to define the professional values, skills, knowledge, qualifications, roles, and attributes needed to articulate a unified professional identity for the early years workforce and put an end to the inequalities which exist between the maintained and PVI sectors. If the early years workforce is to achieve professional status they need to pull together, articulate, and stand up for the fundamental pedagogical values that underpin their practice with young children

and resist the tenets of neoliberal workforce policies which seek to promote political ideology and, as a consequence, suppress practitioner autonomy and professional identity formation.

### **Extended Reflections [B]**

In Scotland all Early Learning and Childcare Practitioners who are not registered teachers are required to register with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). The establishment of a similar Early Years Educator registration system in England might support the identity, recognition and professionalisation of the early years workforce and also their entitlement to continuing professional development. What do you think? This could make an interesting topic for discussion at your next team meeting.

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