

PBPL

Practice-based Professional  
Learning Centre



The Open  
University

**Final report from the PBPL funded project:**

# **A Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner: Perspectives on Professionalism**

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## Executive Summary

The 'Day in the Life (DiL) of an Early Years Practitioner Project' is part of a broader international study of professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) involving researchers from six countries. The overall aims of the study are to explore how early years practitioners 'act as a professional' in their specific local context. The project in England explored:

- What it means to act professionally.
- What being a 'professional' in the early years means in England.

Julie, a nursery manager in a private day nursery, was filmed throughout one working day and interviewed post filming. Julie has a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ, Level 3) and is working towards a [Foundation Degree in Early Years](#) at the Open University. We filmed Julie in a range of tasks including: office administration and management tasks; interacting with children; meetings with staff and senior management; meeting with a parent.

Emerging themes and dispositions included:

- The diversity, complexity, responsibilities and multiple demands of the role.
- Leadership, management and organisational skills.
- Acting as a conduit for information.
- Knowledge of the setting, children and families.
- Professional knowledge base.
- Providing support and reassurance.
- Being accountable for implementation of policy and procedures.
- Availability, accessibility and visibility.
- Trust and confidence.

Data from this project suggests that practitioners working in an English context can and do develop a sense of professional identity and engage in practices which can be described as 'professional'.

## Origin and aims

The project was inspired by the work of a group of researchers concerned with constructions of early childhood, who have filmed 'A Day in the Life' of a two and half year old girl across five countries (Gillen et.al., 2007), and draws on the methodology developed in this project. The DiL project offered the opportunity for a group of researchers who are members of a Special Interest Group (SIG) on Professionalism, within the European Early Childhood Education Research Association ([EECERA](#)), to explore the notion of professionalism with an individual practitioner, each working in an early childhood settings across six countries, Finland, Sweden, Australia, Germany, New Zealand, and England. The project has been planned as a cross national collaborative research project between researchers from University departments. The idea for the project was discussed at the EECERA conference in Dublin in 2005 and a project outline and methodology were developed in 2005 to 2006; this was discussed and agreed at the EECERA conference in Iceland in 2006.

Phase 1 of the project took place in 2006 to 2007 and involved meetings between the project co-directors in England and in Germany. Dissemination of Phase 1 and the planning of Phase 2 took place at the EECERA conference in Prague in 2007. The project directors also met in Ghent in April 2008 to plan for the project meeting and further dissemination at the EECERA conference in Norway in September 2008.

The CETL funded project focuses on the English study.

### **Name and e-mail addresses of key staff associated with the project:**

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## **Aims and scope**

The aims of the wider project are to explore:

1. What it means to act professionally in a particular context;
2. Perceptions of what being a 'professional' in early childhood means- including practitioners' self perceptions and external perspectives;
3. Common features of practice in each context.

The specific goals for the English project were to explore:

- What it means to 'act professionally' in an English context.
- What being a 'professional' in the early years means in England.

## **Method**

### **Data gathering**

Data was gathered using non-participant observation of a full day in the life of an early years practitioner, using:

- i. Filming in May 2007
- ii. Practitioner Interview schedule for contextual information (and audio recording)
- iii. Demographic checklist
- iv. A further practitioner narrative interview was undertaken post filming, in March 2008, following feedback from conference presentations and project group discussions, in order to gain the practitioner's perspective on the edited film. This data is yet to be analysed and will be presented at the EECERA conference in Norway in September 2008.

Julie, a nursery manager in a private day nursery in England was filmed throughout her working day. She has a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ, Level 3) and is working towards a Foundation Degree in Early Years at the Open University.

We observed her involved in:

- Office administration and management tasks.
- Interacting with children, including: story time, indoor and outdoor play and learning experiences, lunch time, preparing for minibus travel.
- Meetings with both a preschool teacher about curriculum planning, and senior staff about training and staff rotas.
- Meeting with a parent.
- Meeting with a key worker to discuss settling in a new child.
- Finance meeting with the Director.

## Analysis

Analysis was guided by grounded theory principles in which the focus was on emerging themes from the video and audio data to illuminate the nature of the professional work of the early years practitioner. Data were analysed to identify an initial set of emerging themes. A 30 minute video was created to provide an overview of Julie's day and activities highlighting the emerging themes. This video was shared with Julie who was invited to comment on the extracts. This commentary was also audio recorded, transcribed and analysed. The themes were disseminated and discussed with the wider project group at the September 2007 meeting at the EECERA conference in Prague.

## Findings

Features of professional practice identified

- The diversity, complexity, responsibilities and multiple demands of the role.
- Leadership, management and organisational skills.
- Acting as a conduit for information.
- Knowledge of the setting, children and families.
- Professional knowledge base.
- Providing support and reassurance.
- Being accountable for implementation of policy and procedures.
- Availability, accessibility and visibility.

We were struck by the diversity, complexity and multiple demands of Julie's role and the energy that her relentless schedule must require. We had the sense of Julie being at the centre of all that was happening. She appeared to have excellent

organisational skills and a detailed knowledge of what was happening and when. She had a clear sense of herself as a professional which seemed to stem from both her *experience* and the *knowledge* she was gaining from her studies. In the interview Julie said that both parents and staff:

are coming to you to look for answers and they want to make sure that you've got the answers and that helps them put their trust in you.

The data from the day's filming and interview illustrate the challenges faced by many practitioners, such as Julie, who take on challenging roles in early years settings which require high levels of responsibility and professionalism, whilst lacking recognition in the form of status or commensurate pay. The interview data suggest that Julie is developing a clear sense of professional identity and meeting the challenges of her role. It is therefore important that practitioners such as Julie are provided with opportunities for professional development and recognition such as those provided by the Open University (OU).

## Impact

### Student experience

The project offered insights into a typical OU Foundation Degree student's professional practice. It highlighted:

- the need for OU Early Years courses to include and strengthen content on leadership and management skills;
- the high level of responsibility and professional practices that some of these students undertake in the early stages of studying for their Foundation Degree;
- the need to take account of the variety of roles and responsibilities undertaken by early years practitioners in the design of courses and assessment strategies ;
- the importance of the work based/practice learning element of these degrees.

This was demonstrated by Julie in drawing on both her *knowledge* and *experience* to inform her role.

### Teaching implications

The Foundation Degree in Early Years courses are undergoing life cycle review and revision. Thus course reviews and remakes are being informed by the project findings.

### Sectoral/national impact

During this project Linda Miller has been a member of the [Children's Workforce Development Council](#) (CWDC) 'Task and Finish' group for the review of Early Years Foundation Degrees. The task group has been informed by the project outcomes. A copy of the edited film has been sent to CWDC as has the book *Professionalism in the Early Years* by Miller and Cable (eds.) (2008) which contains a chapter that draws on the project findings in England.

## References

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