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The Challenges facing the Early Years workforce and the next steps to recover from this current crisis.

It is widely acknowledged the influence and impact positive early years professionals (EYP) can have in children's lives (Duncan, 2024, p2) and providing high quality care helps bridges the equality gap (Burns, J, 2020). However, recently the EYP workforce has come under some strain and has been described as "*Increasingly unstable*" and facing "*Multiple barriers*" (Burns, J, 2020). Some of these multiple factors are due to the workforce feeling "undervalued" and "underpaid" (Burns. J, 2020). This is a concern for the English Department of Education (DfE) who aim by September 2025, to raise the workforce by 40,000(Uk Parliament, 2024). This review will look deeper into the history and progression of the EYP workforce, the issues the profession is facing and how the Government plan to improve the current "crisis in recruitment and retention" within the workforce (Pascal, Bertram, Cole-Alback, 2020, p3).

History of the EYP:

The EYP workforce has been around for centuries, however throughout history some of these were formally known as nannies, nursemaids or servants. The main role would be to care for the children and the household, often unpaid due to living within the household and having the food provided (Duncan, 2024, p2). The emphasis on educating children was not a priority, as the generation believed knowledge was inherited, so the role required no specific qualifications (Duncan,2024, p2).

Nevertheless, the role still had an influential impact on children's lives, as some historical records show. Winston Churchill still had a picture of his childhood "beloved nanny" who had been deceased for over 70 years, by his bedside at his passing (Duncan, 2024, p2). Another was John Bowlby, who's work based on attachment theory was influenced by the attachment John had felt with his nursemaid who left when John when he was four (Duncan, 2024, p2). Over the years, science has evolved and in the late nineteenth century the first nursery was opened. Which was when evidence demonstrated the importance of children developing knowledge through interaction, which began the development of the early year's educator (Duncan, 2024, p2). Subsequently this introduced the value of qualified and skilled

practitioners, which today require an accredited qualification, at least a level 2 in a childcare study, along with relevant knowledge in child development, health, safety and communication (Workbred, 2023).

The Current workforce crisis:

The importance of qualified staff in the early years' workforce is 'critical' to the providence and social impact in children's lives (McDonald, Thorpe, Irvine, 2018, p1). Children experiencing good quality education and care is an "investment" within our society (Thorpe, Jansen, Irvine, 2020, p624). Qualified staff and opportunities for further training are all beneficial in producing high quality education and care (Sellgren, K, 2019). However, one of the current issues the EYP workforce is facing is finding qualified staff and staff retention (McDonald, Thorpe, Irvine, 2018, p1). The BBC reported that early year's settings are unable to replace staff that leave or employ more apprentices due to being financially beneficial for them, which impacts the quality of the care provided (Burns, 2020). There are a number of reasons for staff leaving, some leave due to finding employment which is less challenging and higher pay rates (McDonald, Thorpe, Irvine, 2018, p1). This is a nationwide issue, as some of the EYP workforce and even those with degrees are some of the "*most poorly paid in the education workforce*", leading some staff to live close to the poverty line and relying on family or services for support (Thorpe, Jansen, Irvine, 2020, p625). Supporting these findings Crown (2019) identified that 1 in 10 staff are in poverty and are under the Government "*deprivation criteria*". In relation to these findings some staff feel "*undervalued and underpaid*", from working unpaid hours to complete paperwork, while others have taken on additional jobs for financial support, as there is no option to progress further due to the lack of funding (Burns, 2020). From the above the staff that remain can unfortunately experience mental health issues and work-related stress which not only impacts on them as a person but also the quality of care they provide to the children (Thorpe, Jensen, Irvine, 2020, p625).

Strategies for the future:

Ofsted have acknowledged the challenges setting are experiencing and published reassurance, as well as stating they are engaging with the Department of Education (DfE) in relation to some of the challenges settings are experiencing which are out of the settings control. Ofsted have also published some helpful recommendations that

settings could implement, including building strong leadership roles to support staff professionally and personally, with offering staff with relevant training and access to mental health advice (Owston, Jones, Stanley, 2024). In regard to building strong leaderships, from Autumn 2022 the DfE provide free training for EYP leaders to access the “*National Qualification in Early Years leadership*” (NPQEYL), in hope to encourage employee’s professional development and create more leaders. It is known globally that developing leadership within the EYP workforce can benefit settings (Mona, Halls and Cooper, 2024). The DfE has set out an aim to increase the EYP workforce by up to 40,000 by September 2025, however this is not to improve current standards this is to coincide with the additional provision of up to 84,500 new places for children by September 2025. This is to support the parental employment program, leaving the workforce under more strain. In consideration for this the DfE have announced that they hope to provide funding to settings and increase the hourly rates to help financially and encourage recruitment of individuals with relevant qualifications into the EYP workforce, however this is not looking at the ‘*holistic*’ and ‘*long term*’ planning of the workforce (UK, *Parliament*, 2024).

Considering all of the information above, it highlights how highly qualified staff within settings can provide good quality care and education, however it is also concerning the number of challenges the workforce faces in maintaining these standards with such a high staff turnover and replacement of under-qualified staff. The new aims by the DfE to increase the workforce sounds promising, yet this increase is to support further child spaces which will bring further strain on the workforce if not implemented effectively.

Methodology:

The overall aim of this research is to discover the current level of qualified staff within the early years' settings, how the Early years Practitioners (EYP) are feeling within the workplace and the difficulties leaderships are experiencing in retaining and recruiting staff. The research will be based on EYP settings within the local area and will consist of a school, day care nursery and a childminding facility, otherwise known as a purposeful sample. A purposeful sample has a number of different strategies, however for this research the focus will be on criterion purposeful sampling, this refers to the researcher selecting participants who have experience or knowledge within the field of research (Palinka, *et al*, 2015, p537). Implementing a purposeful sample will give detailed research with limited resources needed, as the criterion strategy enables the researcher to link with professionals in the required field of research (Palinka, *et al*, 2015, p537). Purposeful sampling can also collaborate with both qualitative and quantitative data, which helps broaden the research methods further allowing more "comprehensive data" (Palinka, *et al*, 2015, p537).

Qualitative data is more related to "non-numeric forms" such as interviews, case studies or observations and allows data to be analyzed through description, explanations and patterns (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p155). Whereas Quantitative data is based on data being collected through a numerical source such as surveys. Quantitative data provides opportunities for researchers to collect larger data as it is easier to analyze results through coding (Hammond and Wellington 2021, p156). To gather a broader selection for research, this study will comprise of both types of data collection, using quantitative from surveys and qualitative through interviews, implementing a mixed method approach. Mixed methods are the combination of both quantitative and qualitative data, benefiting the study through summarizing and contrasting the results from two different sources of data (Newby, 2014, p90-92: Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p129).

In order to collect the relevant data, primary research will be conducted. Primary research refers to the data being created and collected directly by the researcher, and which has not already been conducted before, which is known as secondary research (Stainton, 2022: Helpful professor, 2024). Primary research offers the

researcher the opportunity to create specific questions, gain more control and have liability over the data collection (Helpful professor, 2024). However Primary research can be laborious, in regard to creating and carry out the research, which could be potentially expensive if conducted on a large scale, while also risking being bias and swaying responses (Helpful Professor, 2024). However, this study will be conducted on a small scale, consisting of 3 face-to-face interviews with a senior leader from each setting and 150 online surveys to all the other EYP working within each of the settings.

As Mentioned above one of the methods of research this study will consist of will be three face-to-face interviews with a senior leader from each of the chosen settings of study. This could consist of the head teacher or deputy head from the school setting, the owner or manager of the day nursery and the main childminder (if more in a household). These interviews will be voluntary and will be conducted at a time that suits the interviewee and setting. An interview is based on a “unnatural” conversation and interactions with a focus on a particular topic between the researcher (interviewer) and a participant (interviewee). These conversations can be face to face, online via zoom, skype or via telephone and can also be undertaken in group known as a focus group (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p109). Interviews offer researchers an insight into participants’ opinions and feelings on the pacific topic and allow the researcher to see the interviewee’s point of view (Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p109).

This makes interviews a good method in regard to this study, as interviewees are actively involved in the current struggles and can give first-hand responses to the experiences facing the EYP workforce. Interviews can be structured, unstructured and semi-structured. The interview for this study will be an unstructured interview, which provides open-ended questions using the qualitative data approach, allowing flexibility for discussions. There will be an initial question to initiate the discussion, however the interviewer will have a further set of flexible questions to support further discussions on other relevant topics. The interview will mainly ask the senior leaders about their views on recruiting and retaining staff, the barriers they are facing and their opinions on how this could improve.

The benefits from conducting face-to-face interviews are the sense of familiarity and allows for deeper discussions, especially with unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Interviews are less predictable and can offer clarification for both interviewers or interviewees and unlike online or telephone interviews there will be no technical disruptions (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p109).

However, face to face interviews can also feel intimidating for the interviewees, due to one-to-one structure, so developing a rapport and having effective communication skills as an interviewer are vital to positive responses (McNeill, Chapman, 2005, p59/60; Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p109). The interviewer would need to be mindful of the use of language and to remain nonjudgmental or bias (McNeill, Chapman, 2005, p59/60; Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p109). Whilst conducting the interviews, the researcher should also be familiar with the Hawthorne effect and Halo effect as this could jeopardize the individual responses. The Hawthorne effect is when an individual “changes their behaviors” in relation to being observed (Oswald, Sherratt, Smith, 2014). Whilst the Halo effect (HE), is when a positive attributes from an individual or company sways the opinion or research towards them because of familiarity or similarities (Gabrieli, *et al*, 2021). In relation to our interviews the researcher should not priorities one setting or interview over another due to having some form of familiarity on the setting or individual. Another obstacle facing face-to-face interviews is the time constraint to both the interviewer and interviewee, through traveling to each setting or arranging appropriate times to engage, then ensuring to gather all the relevant evidence needed. Especially in relation to unstructured interviews which can be diverse in topic of conversation or could come to an natural end, resulting in limited data collected.

Coinciding with the interviews, the other method of research in this study will be 150 surveys sent out to the other staff within each setting. This will include all the teaching and teaching assistants within the school setting, all the practitioners within the day nursery and any additional staff the childminder may have. Hammond and Wellington (2021, p170) describe a survey as “*systematic collection of data*”. Surveys are often used when collecting quantitative data and should begin with more closed questions and gradually provide more open-ended questions at the end (Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p170). The purpose of the survey is to discover how the participants feel through a scale of agree and disagree statements using a

Linkert scale. The survey will offer an opportunity to gather more responses in regard to the research at a quicker time than interviewing everyone. The survey will consist of twenty questions, requiring some personal details on gender, age bracket and level of qualification to gradually ask opinions on workloads, pay and work satisfaction. However, it will be completely voluntary and anonymous. The main aim regarding the personal questions is to gauge the majority of each within the workforce. Surveys are relatively quick ways of gathering research to give a general overview of a topic. Surveys can coincide with face-to-face interviews, however, can give a quicker response rate and such be presented attractively (Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p170). Although, surveys can restrict research, due to it only collecting the information that is provided from structured questions and allowing no margin for explanations, which could eliminate important information being shared (Chapman, McNeill, 2005). Another consideration is surveys have no guarantee on responses, so the depth of information may not be provided if participants do not invest time to complete them (Hammon, Wellington, 2021, p170).

Through carrying out two varieties of research methods and including the opportunity of a mixed methods approach of qualitative and quantitative data, it provides a stronger research study known as triangulation. Triangulation is based on using multiple methods of data collection, that both results are compared and in agreement to give confidence in the overall research referred to as a “*cross-check*” (Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p84: Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p186: Chapman, McNeill, 2005). The research methods above offer the opportunity to explore triangulation, from comparing responses of the interviews and surveys. Exploring with triangulation will compare and contrast the responses of the overall EYP staff from a variety of different roles (Hammond, Wellington, 2021, p186). However, using the triangulation method can also show some inconsistencies in results, which could leave the data invalid, whilst also being expensive to implement from the level of data analysis required to compare and contrast the results (Chapman, McNeill, 2005).

Ethics:

Throughout any type of research or study it is essential that all ethical standards are carried out at the highest level and through the review process, this is a “*mandatory requirement for all researchers*” (Page, Clare, Nutbrown, 2008, p3&45). Alongside the ethical standards it is also beneficial to be respectful to all individuals, including the researcher, ensuring that there is no discrimination in regard to sexuality or cultural beliefs and that everyone is aware of their legal rights (BERA, 2024, p11). This is an important aspect when working with human participants that the research does no harm or cause distress to the participants (University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), 2022, p20).

Prior to the research being conducted on the current crisis in the EYP workforce topic discussed above, all the participants will receive a brief outline of key information in relation to the research topic and the reasons why the study is being undertaken. Some of these key points of information will be who will carry out the research, what will happen once the research is collected and where to access the findings once complete. Furthermore, it will highlight the expectations the researcher hopes to cover through interview and the surveys (UWTSD, 2022, p22). The interviews and surveys will be based on voluntary consent meaning it is freely up to the individuals to participate, this being the “*core of ethical research*” (UWTSD, 2022, p22). However, with all consent *it* is important that the participants understand they can withdraw anytime without explanation and any data that has been collected or processed will be dismissed. Due to some of the research being conducted by interview it is important that the researchers are able to identify non- verbal signs or signals that acknowledge, the participant would wish to withdraw, again resulting in data being dismissed (BERA, 2024, p13).

This research consists of three face-to-face interviews and 150 online surveys. Whilst the interviews will be face-to-face, and information recorded on paper, the aim is to keep as many of the participants as anonymous as possible to maintain privacy, in the hope that individuals will speak more openly in regard to how they currently feel within the workplace. Every individual has the right to anonymity, which refers to

hiding any details that can link to an individual being identified (UWTSD, 2022, p22). Gov.uk (no date) highlights the researcher is liable for any personal data and the researcher must ensure the data collected is lawful, purposeful, is up to date and only collects what is necessary for the study. The information should then only be stored for as long as it is required and should be protected.

In regard to this research the online surveys will be conducted via a QR code with each scanned code consisting of a one-off code linked to one individual. Although personal details such as name and addresses will not be required, the QR code will give a numeric code to each participant in order for them to withdraw if necessary and further protect the anonymity of the participant. However, the surveys will require details such as age, gender and qualifications levels, which will require use of the data protection act. This information is required to infinity the current level of male/female EYP or the general age bracket within the workforce as well as the level of qualifications currently in force.

In order to protect this information, there will be an initial time frame to complete the survey of a week and approximately a further three weeks to analysis the data, once this is complete the surveys and interview notes will be destroyed. Whilst data is being stored on the online platforms, secure networks and passwords will be implemented, whilst paper documents will be kept locked away complying with the privacy and storage guidelines in BERA (2024, p22). In relation to the interviews, initially names will be required for arranging the interviews and encouraging familiarity, however, the names of the participants will not be recorded on any information and will be referred to as source A, B and C. This allows the participants to be able to contact the researcher in relation to the right to withdraw, whilst remaining anonymous to other participants and viewers. This coincides with confidentiality.

Although confidentiality is also associated with who has the rights to access the information collected it also gives the researcher a “duty of care” (UWTSD, 2022, p24), resulting in anonymity and confidentiality not always be assured. This may default in cases where there is an illegal action or the risk of harm, resulting in the researcher seeking appropriate authorities and submitting personal data (BERA, 2024, p22/23). In relation to this study the UWTSD, ensures all students have a

current up to date Disclosure and barring service (DBS). These are for anyone who works with children or individuals under the age of 18 in private, public or carrying out volunteer work (UWTSD, 2022, p27). Although the researcher will not be undertaking any tasks involving children or individuals under the age of 18, the researcher will be entering the premises where potentially children could be, or information of these vulnerable individuals could be visible.

The BERA (2024, p20-21) discusses how the implementation of the research should aim to put all participants at ease and prior to the research being undertaken the researcher has a duty of care in recognizing any potential harm or risks to the participants, the researcher and the institution in which the researcher represents. There are a number of potential risks which may affect the participants, such as the loss of the data or personal details breaching the data protection act. To avoid this the researcher will ensure all surveys avoid personal details which can directly link to individuals, this will be implemented through coding and online passwords security. The documentations of the interviews will be locked away and participants will not be named, however acknowledged as A, B, C. Another potential risk, especially through face-to-face interviews, is the risk of participants becoming upset or uncomfortable. In accordance with this, Bera (2024, p20) states the researcher should “*recognize the right for all participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason*”. This also could result in the participant making a disclosure in relation to safeguarding or whistle blowing, which is the term used in relation to reports of something that is occurring at the workplace which is against procedures (Gov.uk, no date). In relation to this, the researcher should inform the participants that confidentiality or anonymity may not be conducted, and relevant details should be passed on to appropriate authorities, safeguarding officers or the employer grievance policy (BERA, 2024, p24: Gov.UK, no date). Another potential risk to participants is health and safety, for this study the researcher will be attending the participants’ workplace. If the setting is open, relevant arrangements will be made prior to the interviews to ensure the staff-to-child ratio is adhered to, there is a quiet and comfortable space for interviews to take place, and other staff are aware if issues arise needing the senior leader they may interrupt. In regard to the surveys there will mainly be a leaflet left in staff rooms with QR codes to scan on digital devices, which can be completed if willing at a convenient time.

The BERA (2024, p33) highlights that researchers should have adequate training before carrying out research, especially in relation to fieldwork, to prepare them to deal with potential conflict, deal with disclosures and gain knowledge of legal responsibilities whilst ensuring researchers have a valid DBS is beneficial. Through implementing the BERA suggestions, it helps to reduce the risks not only to the participants but to the researchers and the institutions which are represented.

The risks to researchers are mainly based on having insufficient data through lack of responses or participants withdrawing. Other possible risks could be in relation to methods not being substantial for data collection or not being the most useful source of data collection for the topic.

Lastly, the effect on the institutions if any of the above risks appear, this affects the institute's reputation by other institutions and the public, which could result in penalties, legal charges or loss of employment.

The BERA (2024, p30), states that:

“Institutions such as universities have responsibility to establishing and sustaining research collaborative with other institutions”

The BERA encourages institutions to provide information to the researchers to provide guidance and understanding of procedures (BERA, 2024, p33). If institutions follow this statement, researchers will have lower risk of breaching conducts, due to information being widely spread and acknowledged by all. Supporting BERA statement is UWTSD, who adhere to this and ensure the high level of “*ethical standards*” is used by both staff and students when conducting research (UWTSD, 2022, p4), supporting students to follow appropriate standards to eliminating potential risks from occurring, whilst also providing the guidelines if needed if a risk was to occur.

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