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Contributors: **By:**Michael Gasper

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Professional Practice and Early Childhood Today

Professional practice and early childhood today
Michael Gasper

Chapter Overview

This chapter explores several factors influencing the aims, focus and direction of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals in their day-to-day work. Consideration is given to the values, aims and principles which have traditionally guided and underpinned ECEC practice (principled practice), set against the fluctuating and changing social, political and cultural demands shaping and re-shaping the context in which ECEC professionals strive to achieve the best they can for children and families. While citing emerging contradictions the chapter provides reflections on the challenges and opportunities these present.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s there has been an increasing understanding of the need to see both theory and practice of early childhood development in holistic terms, rather than as separate, compartmentalised areas. Professionals from a wide range of backgrounds including health (which itself embodies a complexity of disciplines), childcare, education and social care have come to regard increased professional co-operation and multi-agency working as the most efficient and effective way of providing support for young children, their families and their communities. The growth in the number of reference and text books exploring and promoting multi-agency working published since 2000 indicates the development in understanding its value in theory and practice and demonstrates research informing and working towards improving practice. These two principles – the value of multi-agency working and of research-led improvement to practice – are the foundations on which this chapter is grounded.

What is a Modern Early Years Professional?

In this chapter, ECEC encapsulates a professional response to children up to the age of 8 years. However, what is meant by 'professional' is more complex and less easy to define. In other contexts 'professional' refers only to those with a qualification or specific expertise, but in early years there is a greater understanding of the value and importance of the qualities individuals demonstrate in practice, with or without formal qualifications. There is also a distinct emphasis on 'principled practice', that is, value-based practice grounded in ethics, from which principles are derived recognising the needs of the child and parents as central, with the 'professional' as a facilitating partner. When combined with theoretical knowledge and an understanding of a child's physical, social and emotional, spiritual and intellectual development, these qualities produce the optimum professional, dedicated to best practice and the constant development and improvement of ECEC. An example of the recognition of the value of both academic knowledge and positive attributes is the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL). This unique leadership development programme developed by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, which ran from 2004 to 2014, uses an experiential approach balancing the theory and practice of the process of leadership as well as the outcomes.

NPQICL

This postgraduate-level programme evolved from the recognition that early years leaders lacked distinctive leadership training relevant to the field. The first version provided separate pathways for existing graduates, with an approach based on independent study, and those without a formal qualification – of which there were many – with a facilitated programme using an experiential approach. At the first review the National College acknowledged the feedback from participants which highlighted the mutual benefits felt by all when they had been able to meet and dialogue together. The revised version provided for two forms of entry application to a

single, facilitated experiential programme. The subsequent changes to the programme treated all participants as equals, once they had satisfied the entry requirements. Having facilitated in different areas and for different providers over a seven year period, the value of professional exchange, interaction and dialogue has been manifest. The creation of Leadership Learning Groups to explore concepts outside the face-to-face sessions further enhanced professional support, exchange and development.

Why ECEC? During the 1990s the Conservative Government introduced initiatives targeted at health and education inviting local authorities to identify and apply for funding of 'Action Zones' (Ofsted, 2003). These were conceived as separate entities, but in practice professionals from different disciplines often found themselves working in more than one zone and recognised the overlap between their services. At the same time, the voice of early years had become an effective force influencing Westminster and local politics so that with the advent of New Labour, these emerging trends were transformed into a policy of co-operation. Education, social care and health overlapped and were actively encouraged professionals to work towards greater co-operation. This has been especially important in developing best practice in safeguarding (see [Chapters 11](#) and [16](#)).

Characteristics of a Modern Early Years Professional

A significant feature of ECEC is its attraction for people from a variety of backgrounds. These include education, health, social care, community development, private, voluntary and independent practice and the wider world of commerce, service and manufacturing industries. Each of these backgrounds provides the individual with a unique perspective and is a rich resource for teams to explore and appreciate. However, this can only happen if there is active encouragement of attitudes which promote open dialogue, value contributions from all, and are free from constraints of traditional hierarchy. The diverse backgrounds and qualifications among ECEC professionals, combined with formal qualification, extend knowledge and understanding and strengthen attributes underpinning communities of practice, considered in [Chapter 3](#). What characterises ECEC professionals is revealed by their 'key attributes and attitudes', including what unites and contributes to a team's 'aliveness' (Wenger et al., 2002: 50). I propose the following key attributes of practitioners I have observed over 40 years: seeing themselves as servants, identifying and serving the needs of children, families and communities; willing to actively understand other perspectives (Covey, 2004: 236ff); open in terms of what they know or don't know, what they agree or disagree with; adaptable in recognising conflicting pressures and willing to consider new approaches which may be unconventional or require fresh protocols and working agreements, as in Schön's 'professional pluralism' (Schön, 2011: 17); willing to share good practice; being reflective listeners, attentive, actively using deep listening and using what has been learnt from the past in planning future action (Schön, 2011: 350); being non-judgemental, able to de-personalise issues and to look beyond the obvious; having a strong sense of values, based around identifying and meeting the needs of children and their parents. These attributes promote more efficient partnership and positive working relationships. More efficient because they encourage awareness of each person's skills and knowledge and confidence to put them to best use, and more positive working relationships, because each person's contribution is valued and encouraged.

These attitudes and attributes are tools enabling and encouraging modern ECEC professionals to contribute confidently, to know when they need to ask and to do so, to work alongside colleagues from other agencies, respecting their skills and knowledge, but willing to contribute when they can, and respectfully challenging when necessary, rather than keeping their own counsel. Equally important is confidence in not knowing: understanding their limitations and accepting themselves as 'imperfect leaders' (Taylor, 2007) yet 'comfortable in their skin' while seeking to extend and develop their knowledge and understanding to enrich individual and team practice. This is fundamental in underpinning personal confidence, and developing a whole-team approach to practice which fosters similar attributes in the children and adults who are served.

How does Theory Support these Characteristics?

Laurence Stenhouse, who died in 1980, had a major impact on the development of a school curriculum that took more account of process, summarised as follows:

Underpinning this view of the educational process was an epistemology that situated all 'knowledge' as provisional, and from it emerged Stenhouse's 'process model' of curriculum design (1975) to counterbalance the 'objectives model' implied by a transmission view of education, and the concept of 'the teacher as a researcher' implied by the need to discern conditions that allow pupils to accept responsibility for their own learning. (British Educational Research Association annual conference 2012 email to members 31 July 2012)

These three aspects, the provisional nature of knowledge, the importance of the process of learning, and the practitioner as researcher, remain of paramount importance to all those involved in ECEC (see also [Chapter 16](#)). The pace of change requires all involved to understand ethical implications and to have secure values, shared with colleagues, upon which clear aims are based, and from which overarching principles are devised to guide practice. The kind of knowledge, skills and understanding required by practitioners navigating the shifting sands of change need a sound base but must also be flexible and adaptable. My involvement with ECEC has shown me that practitioners who are open to challenge and confident enough to risk creative approaches are less likely to become fixed in comfort zones or frightened by change. Whether challenges come from their immediate colleagues or from partners sharing their prime focus of the child, the family and the local community, practitioners open to challenge and unafraid of change will be more confident to move beyond the known, tried and tested, thereby developing through their own 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1978). Practitioner attitudes, dispositions, personal and shared confidence are critical factors influencing successful and effective practice (Goleman, 1999: 68–72; Covey, 2004: 75–78). Understanding the inevitability and necessity of change means practitioners can embrace research findings aimed at improving their understanding of child, family and community needs to guide and develop change, and which in turn stimulates improvement of existing practice and current 'provisional' knowledge.

The debate over the primacy of outcomes or process is not new. I trained as a teacher between 1969 and 1972 at a time when there was a significant shift in methodology away from didactic approaches focused on imparting knowledge. In the 1970s the Nuffield Foundation, supported by Government, developed a Secondary Science curriculum encouraging practical enquiry and discovery learning. The professional was a companion on a journey ready to listen, challenge, support or direct as necessary. This spoke to me as a new professional as I learnt more about how learning takes place, focusing on progressively younger ages. It reinforced the importance of experiential learning and interactive, practical enquiry. The critical importance of interaction between parents and babies during their first six months of life in establishing attachment bonding is well documented (Bowlby, 1953: 91; Edmond and Price, 2012: 119ff.; see also [Chapter 14](#)). The value of 'play' in early childhood in extending physical and mental capacities also depends on a high level of practical experience and appropriate challenge (Fabian and Mould, 2009: 25; Bruce, 2010: 314ff.). Approaches recognising early years as 'not merely a time when children are prepared and trained for adult life' (Bruce, 2010: 55) owe a great deal to Froebel, Montessori and Steiner who saw childhood as an important stage 'in its own right' (Bruce, 2010: 55). This child-centred, process-focused model, combined with critical observation of each child's progress and assessment of their continuing development needs, is promoted by settings such as Pen Green in England and those in Reggio Emilia in Italy. It tends to be more common in pre-schools than in schools themselves, although some continue to promote 'discovery' approaches. Professionals see themselves as servants whose task it is to develop creative environments for children to explore. As Bruner put it:

Mastery of the fundamental ideas of a field involves not only the grasping of general principles, but also the development of an attitude toward learning and enquiry ... towards the possibility of solving problems on one's own ... (Bruner, 1977 in Bruce, 1987: 49)

This requires more than simply presenting facts (see Edmond and Price, 2012: 39).

ECEC is dynamic and constantly changing: practitioners will be encouraged to extend whatever grounding in theories they have of learning and knowledge of emotional, physical, psychological, social and spiritual development, as they progress to enable children to start strong.

How do these Characteristics Affect Practice?

In the last two decades ECEC professionals have found themselves in a context of perpetual flux. Initially

the emphasis was on improving quality and qualifications with financial support provided. The Welsh National Assembly began to develop its own distinctive plan (see [Chapter 17](#)), as did Northern Ireland and Scotland. Under New Labour, Northern Ireland developed regional multi-agency co-ordinating groups while Scotland and Wales focused on improving interprofessional co-ordination and raising professional standards. All three now have developing strategies which emphasise multi-agency co-ordination focused on addressing issues of child poverty and a more professional, graduate workforce (see Welsh Government, 2013; Education Scotland, 2014; nidirect, 2014). In England, however, shrinking economies and national reductions in funding have limited professional development, enforcing re-structuring at local level and causing an almost universal shift to re-organise children's centres into 'locality' models: larger grouping of centres, often joining less effective with more effective centres, under a single leader with the Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection framework re-structured to reflect this. This is echoed by the grouping of small schools in rural areas under one Headteacher due to the post-2008 reductions in funding. The withdrawal or reduction of public money and emphasis on commissioned services has increased provision of ECEC by private, independent or voluntary agencies. Financial and organisational pressures have forced reductions in services, increasing tension between the emphasis on targeted services, reinforced by Ofsted target expectations, and universal services, which frequently provide first point of contact with new families. This false distinction between 'targeted' and 'universal' exemplifies the dilemmas facing practitioners, who find themselves powerless to influence critical decisions. While increased funding for places for two year-olds, and for 'troubled families' has been provided, there remains an overall reduction in capacity to provide a wide range of ECEC services, the most recent report on Children's Centres (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013) re-emphasising the core purpose of centres focusing on those in greatest need. An unseen effect of the reduction of staff resulting from the re-shaping of local authorities means there are already fewer people left in practice and decision making positions with a sufficient knowledge of ECEC to make considered decisions, informed by knowledge of practice rather than expediency.

Private nursery provision is still popular but affordability is a mounting concern – the growing gap between those who can and cannot afford it increasing the negative pressures on families with young children. Pressures on schools to show improvement in performance remain, judged by narrow outcome measures and in consequence undervaluing process including child-centred, play-based approaches. The diminished ability of families on reduced means to adequately support their children in extracurricular and homework activities is another hidden consequence of local level re-structuring. ECEC practice is challenged with maintaining the highest quality standards, meeting reaching targets including those families deemed 'troubled', tracking development to show value for money and providing evidence of effectiveness which will help to develop payment by results, balancing the resourcing of targeted and universal services, all on significantly reduced budgets.

While there are many settings in which the approaches, attitudes and attributes discussed above are encouraged and work well, good practice can be constrained by external expectations and demands. Government policy to significantly reduce the funding of local authorities and to fundamentally change their role so they become commissioners and overseers rather than direct providers of services will adversely affect ECEC providers increasing emphasis on private provision has positive and negative aspects: positive because innovative partnerships can provide alternative sources of funding and open new initiatives; negative because good quality practice can be lost for lack of funding and sectors can be hostages to fortune in an open market where large corporations can quickly consume areas of provision, immune from external audit and quality control, as witnessed in parts of the USA and Australia.

Difficulties arise when systems and practice, or those operating within them, become narrow or constrained and cease to encourage development in all key areas. It is a small step that shifts the balance from a child-centred, developmentally appropriate curriculum and environment to one focused on meeting externally imposed demands. These may be well intentioned: the demand for evidence of success is no bad thing in itself, but if it becomes the main priority dominating all else, it shifts the balance negatively. Whatever the setting – daycare, private pre-school provision, nurseries or the early years of school – leaders committed to a single philosophy or method or who are only interested in statistical proof of success, risk losing sight of the reason their setting exists. Inspection regimes which focus unduly on outcomes alone, with insufficient regard to process, are unhelpful and push settings and practitioners away from key aspects of interaction with children and families. Negative attitudes of other professionals towards those with EYT qualification

negatively affect team building (Hadfield et al., 2012). Quality measures tied to narrow definitions of success also risk missing the point. All these tend to disempower the early years workforce, families and children. An early conclusion in the Sure Start National Evaluation noted:

In addition, where partners have put the interests and needs of families ... before the interests of their own agency or organisation, and listened and responded to parents' views, has also been a key determinant for a successful partnership (Ball, 2002)

This remains equally true in all areas of early years provision. The challenge for practitioners is to hold fast to their values and principles and maintain high quality practice. All too often enforced change includes fixed timescales, which don't allow meaningful consultation, imposed by administrators also under pressure to complete actions to strict timescales, with limited consideration of consequences. Too often it is the ECEC workforce which has been treated as the piñata of policy review, to be beaten and broken before providing hidden treasures. Employers find themselves unable to use the best practice which their workforce recognises and adopts, no longer listening or inclusive, imposing change. This is de-motivating and disempowering. How can practitioners overcome the worst effects?

What is the Value of Reflective Practice and Practitioner Research?

The notion of knowledge being provisional brings to mind Socrates' use of dialogue among a small group of his students to arrive at new understandings of knowledge and which are very much based in the 'present' for those involved. I suspect that the dialogues were not always unstructured; that they built on previous dialogues, gradually extending and deepening understandings. Tina Bruce argues that:

Informed reflection, within the context of a developmentally appropriate curriculum and an understanding of how children think and learn, will help you to recognise and value your strengths, identify the areas in need of future development and establish priorities for action to move your practice forward. (Bruce, 2010)

Bruce stresses the additional value of this process when it involves others. Sharing reflections on practice with colleagues and through professional journaling has become more valued. The notion of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 2011) promoted the value to practitioners of stepping back and reflecting on what has happened, identifying what has gone well and what can be improved to inform future planning and practice. This 'reflection on action' then translates into 'reflection in action' (Schön, 2011).

Reflective practice involves the active engagement of a professional with the people and situations around them (see [Chapters 2, 3 and 4](#) for a deeper exploration). It involves the professional working at different levels of engagement simultaneously as they talk and actively listen, attuning themselves to the emotional and practical circumstances of those around them, whether colleagues or clients. The reflective process sees the professional constantly questioning what they see, hear and feel, sharing the insights this provides with their colleagues. It requires constant adjustment and challenging of assumptions, searching for deeper meanings, for what is not being said as much as what is, and helps the professional to consider why this may be so.

Reflective journals become a 'critical friend': a means of recording what professionals believe they have seen, heard and understood, enabling them to analyse, challenge and clarify their thoughts. The physical act of writing is helpful here because it employs different mental processes and can unlock new pathways into understanding. The process of reflection enables the professional to better understand what they are dealing with and to arrive at a balanced view of how they might appropriately help the individual, the situation or themselves to move forward positively. It can also help them to comprehend what is within their skill, resources and working remit to deal with and what is not or where they will have to seek advice or help.

After struggling with the negative attitude and abrasive attitude of a member of their team, the team leader took time to reflect and consider what the real issue might be. By setting emotional responses aside and de-personalising, the focus became fixed on 'difficult' actions rather than a 'difficult' person. The leader began to understand the team member's perspective, the responses they had given and those of other team members. This became the first step in positively identifying the real issues and addressing them, rather than simply being reactive and inadvertently contributing to the negative spiral. Reflection provided time and space and

was the first step in resolving the issue and establishing a positive and more trusting relationship between the leader and the team and the team members and each other.

Research is in many ways closely linked to reflective practice. Both involve questioning, summarising and critical analysis, identifying key questions and finding the most appropriate way of exploring them further, and are intended to improve practice. However, research still retains a certain mystique and can be viewed as a discourse whose applicability lies beyond the remit of everyday practice. This view is changing and practitioner research is becoming more accessible. There are now more introductory texts which define methodology and set out clearly different research methods and their uses, de-mystifying the process. Essentially the research method will depend on what you want to explore or find out but practitioner research tends to be 'action research' (McNiff, 2010). This approach recognises and celebrates the involvement of the researcher in the process, questioning the researcher's perspective and interpretation of what is observed or recorded in order to inform and improve everyday practice. It is rigorous, grounded in the principle that professionals want to know what is going on in their practice, what is working well and what can be improved further. The process actively involves others, whether professionals or not. The value of practitioner research and reflective practice lies in the desire of practitioners to constantly improve; to benefit those they serve.

Parents Trained as Volunteers and Partners in Collecting Data

Family Workers in a Children's Centre wanted to explore how parents and children saw the services they were being offered: how did they value the services they were using; what did they like and why; what was missing; what could be improved? They decided to use parent volunteers to help and working with their local College, arranged for the parents' training and the research to be accredited. The staff and setting were able to gather useful information about the quality of the services on offer, possible improvements and new services to explore. The parents were able to gain credits towards a Level 2 award and boosted their self confidence, going on to achieve Level 3 qualifications.

The example above illustrates how reflective practice can make significant changes using an inclusive process, enabling parents to actively contribute as equal partners in the research. It can provide a pathway towards achieving qualifications and raise self-esteem for partners, thereby benefiting all involved.

However this process depends on professionals using open and inclusive approaches, modelling and encouraging a creative, developmental ethos, rather than being constrained by systems which are inflexible, including the limitations imposed by their own comfort zones. Professionals need to fight for systems which serve principled practice rather than dictate, which encourage freedom rather than constraint. It is essential that early years professionals actively engage and ensure their voice is heard.

Key Emerging Issues and Themes

Tensions between Imposed Targeted Tasks and Creative, Child-Centred Processes

The political desire for quick, quantitative data risks undervaluing the qualitative benefits which reveal the real impact of services on individuals. The process of change is gradual as witnessed by the international successes of the first decade of the new millennium. Assessment and accountability require the right kind of rigour, focus, emphasis and time: developing balanced accountability, which includes where people have started from as well as where they finish, is essential for a true picture to emerge.

Understanding the processes of child development and learning will require child-centred professionals with a better understanding of both if realistic targets are to be set.

The Need for Joined up Working: Multi-Agency Collaboration

The case for multi-agency collaboration has been successfully made (Wenger et al., 2002; Aubrey, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2009; Gasper, 2010; DfE, 2012). The challenge in an era of rapid change and economic

downturn is to ensure knowledge and wisdom from previous decades is used to plan and inform structures underpinning future practice. This is a severe test: both nationally and internationally, reductions threaten to leave fewer people with knowledge and understanding of ECEC best practice and the possibility of externally imposed, narrowly focused targets. ECEC services are likely to become 'leaner', more tightly focused, and less able to be delivered collaboratively as organisations look inwards, with accountability in conflict with their knowledge of local and individual needs.

Regulation

Economic constraints will need creative approaches, for example, the commissioning out of services. A high degree of responsibility for identifying and meeting local and individual needs and maintaining high quality practice will rest on those providing commissioned services. Regulating at local level will rest with a reduced workforce led by organisations which may have limited knowledge of the field and may be focused on financial detail and specific contractual obligations rather than quality or best practice: those commissioning services need a clear standard of quality, based on local needs, and not to rely on providers themselves for quality control. Could this mean increased self-assessment or practitioner research with researchers working in collaboration with early years professionals?

What Kind of Attributes does this Call for in those Working in the Field?

New early years professionals and those providing commissioned services need to embody the characteristics defined earlier. These are:

- having a strong commitment and sense of service to the needs of children, families and communities;
- willingness to actively understand and engage with other perspectives;
- seeking to engage with and include all professional colleagues;
- openness in terms of what they know or don't know, what they agree or disagree with;
- adaptability in recognising conflicting pressures and being willing to consider new approaches which may be unconventional or require fresh protocols and working agreements;
- being reflective listeners, attentive, actively using deep listening and using past experience in considering action in future; non-judgemental, able to de-personalise issues and to look beyond the obvious; optimistic even in the face of difficult times;
- aware of each person's skills and knowledge and seeking to put them to best use.

Critical Learning Activity

What 'skills' and 'qualities' do you think would underpin being a 'new early years professional? In particular when are these transferred into practice? Some examples are set out below to act as a stimulus for discussion and reflection as part of a student study group or online student community or for personal study. What do you think?

- Interprofessional, inter-agency or integrated practice is an integral part of any professional role within the ECEC arena. This is a strong assertion and one that has a profound implication for practice. Do you agree this is an essential component of demonstrating professional quality?
- Do you:
 - have a professional conviction when describing what you do?
 - embed values and ideas about the way children should be taught and learn into what you do as a practitioner?
 - show persistence - find alternative approaches, not giving up, even if it means starting again?
- Are you able to:
 - ask for support if you need it? In particular can you discuss how to find solutions for any challenges with co-workers and those from other agencies?
 - engage in ongoing training?

- manage your professional time which is precious and find a balance between administration duties and working with children?
- understand and articulate what inhibits and what enables your role?
- take time to observe and recognise how others lead and manage?
- understand the patterns and predictability of events which have an impact on children and families?
- take time to consider, reflect and explain your actions?
- understand the distinction between leading change and responding to change?
- show people from different professional agencies you value what they do?
- work out how best to communicate with other professionals?
- take time to consult with other professionals to find tools, materials and resources needed for a particular project or idea?
- articulate and share the values and beliefs which underline the way your setting operates?

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