

Beyond Nose-Wiping: Reclaiming Professional Identity in Early Years Care.

The early years sector is the backbone of society, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood and undervalued professions in the UK. Every day, childcare practitioners nurture, educate, safeguard, and support children through the most critical stage of their development. We are early educators, in partnership with parents, the emotional anchors, the observers who spot early needs, and the professionals who hold families together when life becomes complicated.

And yet, despite the depth of skill and responsibility involved, we are still too often dismissed as “babysitters” or “nose wipers.” A quiet hierarchy persists between daycare practitioners and school-based nursery staff, shaping how parents, agencies, and even policymakers perceive our work. This hierarchy is not only outdated but also damaging. It undermines professional identity, weakens recruitment, and contributes to the workforce crisis now threatening the entire sector (Childcare & Education Expo, 2026).

It’s time to ask the uncomfortable question:

Why are childcare practitioners still fighting to be recognised as professionals, and what must change to fix it?

Despite the years of training, qualifications, and hands-on expertise required to become a childcare practitioner, our profession continues to sit at the bottom of an invisible hierarchy. Daycare practitioners are routinely viewed as “less professional” than school-based nursery teachers, even when many practitioners in daycare settings hold higher-level qualifications (British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2025).

This divide is felt daily. Parents often share more detailed information with school nurseries than with daycare settings, even though expectations for care, safeguarding, and holistic support are often higher in daycare settings. Some daycare practitioners report that referrals from daycare settings to multi-agency partners may be perceived differently to those originating from

schools, raising questions about professional credibility across sectors (Feinstein *et al.*, 2024; Spinks, 2025).

To complicate matters further, not all school nursery teachers hold a full teaching qualification. Yet degree-level daycare practitioners remain overlooked. This is not to diminish the skill or value of school nursery teachers, but to highlight the persistent “**them and us**” culture that shapes professional identity in the early years sector.

So where does this hierarchy come from?

The devaluation of early years work can also be understood through theories of professional identity and emotional labour. Historically, caring professions have been associated with feminine and nurturing qualities, leading society to view relational work as natural rather than skilled. As a result, the complex knowledge, decision-making, and pedagogical expertise required in early years settings can become invisible, contributing to lower professional status and pay despite increasing qualification requirements.

Where Does This Perception Originate?

Several systemic factors contribute:

1. Local Authority Structures

School-based early years provision is embedded within the education system, while daycare sits within childcare and social care frameworks. This creates different expectations, inspections, funding models, and professional status. (Estyn, n.d; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2026)

2. Training Pathways

Training routes into early years vary widely. Some are rigorous and practice-based; others are inconsistent. Welsh Government research shows significant variation in qualification levels across the sector, with many practitioners holding Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications, while others progress to degree level. (Lightfoot, 2019; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025)

3. Low Pay and Poor Conditions

Nursery managers in the UK often earn significantly less than school teachers, despite comparable responsibility for safeguarding, learning, and well-being. Workforce surveys repeatedly highlight low pay as a major barrier to recruitment and retention (National Education Union, 2025; Commission Low Pay, 2026; Social Care Wales, 2026).

4. Confusion Over “Care” vs “Education”

Daycare settings are expected to deliver holistic care, emotional, physical, developmental, and educational, often going far beyond regulated national minimum standards. Meanwhile, school nurseries are framed primarily as learning environments. Yet the children are the same age.

Why, then, are expectations and professional recognition so different?

The Workforce Crisis: A Perfect Storm

Plaid Cymru has proposed expanding funded childcare from nine months onward, following England’s recent rollout. But the workforce is shrinking, not growing. Welsh Government research estimates over 16,000 workers are currently in the childcare and play sector, and predicts a 24% increase in staffing will be required by 2027/28 to meet demand. That’s around 4,000 additional staff needed (Welsh Government, 2024).

At the same time, colleges continue to funnel uncertain 16-year-olds into “care or hair,” reflecting a longstanding, outdated stereotype that positions childcare as a low-status career option requiring limited expertise.

Training Quality: Quantity Over Quality?

Welsh Government incentivises training providers based on learner completion, not necessarily competence. Many CCPLD learners report that providers focus heavily on core skills rather than on high-quality early-years pedagogy. According to workforce mapping research, settings, rather than training providers, often bear the burden of ensuring that learners gain real-world experience and meet qualification criteria (Welsh Government, 2023; Mikuska *et al.*, 2025).

This raises a critical question:

Are we prioritising the number of practitioners entering the sector over the quality of their preparation?

Settings are closing, and the sector is under strain

Workforce shortages, rising costs, and inconsistent funding models have contributed to the closure of settings across Wales and the UK. Welsh Government mapping reports show fluctuating numbers of childcare settings by local authority and ongoing pressure on capacity. (Welsh Government, 2024; Talbot, 2025)

If the sector continues to be undervalued, underpaid, and misunderstood, closures will only accelerate.

Why Professional Recognition Matters for Play-Based Curricula

Successful implementation of play-based approaches depends on practitioners having the confidence, autonomy, and professional status to make informed pedagogical decisions. Observation, assessment, planning through children's interests, supporting risk-taking, and developing enabling environments are complex professional skills. When practitioners are viewed merely as carers, the expertise required to deliver a play-based curriculum is overlooked. If Wales is committed to child-centred learning, it must also be committed to valuing the professionals who make that learning possible (Irvine *et al.*, 2024; Vitaud, 2026).

Professional identity matters

If society sees us as “nose wipers” or “babysitters,” how can we expect new practitioners to enter the sector with passion, professionalism, and pride?

The “halo effect” surrounding teachers, where parents automatically view them as more authoritative, reinforces the divide. This can lead to poor information-sharing between schools and daycare settings, even when both are responsible for the same child’s safety and well-being.

What needs to change?

- A unified professional identity across early years education and care.

- Parity of esteem between daycare practitioners and school-based staff.
- Improved pay and conditions to reflect the complexity of the role.
- High-quality, practice-embedded training with strong provider accountability.
- Public awareness campaigns to challenge outdated stereotypes.
- Better multi-agency recognition of daycare practitioners' expertise.

Childcare practitioners are not "less than." We are educators, carers, safeguarding leads, developmental specialists, and emotional anchors for the youngest children in society.

It's time the system and the public recognised that.