



Nannies, nursery nurses and early years professionals: constructions of professional identity in the early years workforce in England

Gill McGillivray

To cite this article: Gill McGillivray (2008) Nannies, nursery nurses and early years professionals: constructions of professional identity in the early years workforce in England, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16:2, 242-254, DOI: [10.1080/13502930802141659](https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930802141659)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930802141659>



Published online: 18 Jul 2008.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4752



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 7 View citing articles [↗](#)

Nannies, nursery nurses and early years professionals: constructions of professional identity in the early years workforce in England

Gill McGillivray*

Newman University College, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT: Recent policy in England has created a new status of ‘Early Years Professional’, thus imposing professionalisation of the early years workforce. There has been an increase in policy focus on those working with young children, and such a focus raises questions about practitioners’ own responses to the debate about their training, education, qualifications and work. How early years practitioners see themselves, their collective or individual identity, or both, may be unsettled by being the centre of discussion and reform.

This research aimed to investigate historical and recent texts using discourse analysis to expose discourse that may have shaped and contributed to the workforce’s construction of their professional identity. A theoretical framework of professional identity, proposed by Tucker, is useful in its recognition of how prevailing and contemporary discourses contribute to the construction of professional identity.

Findings suggest that constructs may exacerbate uncertainty, change and struggle for the workforce, and that there are complex and enduring aspects of professional identity that may influence perceptions. Imposed changes in training, assessment and qualifications, long-held beliefs evident in discourse, ideology and day-to-day practices also contribute to constructs of professional identity.

The implications for practice are a need to recognise the complexity of professional identity and therefore the needs of some members of workforce as they move towards professionalisation. It is also argued that the voice of the workforce has been absent historically, and that current reform provides an opportunity for listening and responding.

RÉSUMÉ: Une politique récente a créé en Angleterre un nouveau statut pour les ‘professionnels de la petite enfance’ qui impose ainsi une professionnalisation des personnels de la petite enfance. Il y a eu un intérêt grandissant pour ceux qui travaillent auprès de jeunes enfants et un tel intérêt soulève la question des réponses que les praticiens, eux-mêmes, apportent au débat relatif à leurs formation, éducation, qualifications et travail. La façon dont les praticiens de la petite enfance se voient, leur identité collective ou individuelle ou les deux, peut être perturbée par le fait d’être au centre des discussions et des réformes.

Cette recherche, qui avait pour but d’étudier les textes anciens et récents à l’aide d’une analyse de contenu, présente des discours qui ont pu modeler et contribuer à la construction de l’identité professionnelle de ces personnels. Le cadre théorique de l’identité professionnelle, proposé par Tucker est utile de par la reconnaissance de la façon dont les discours contemporains dominants contribuent à la construction de l’identité professionnelle.

*Email: g.m.mcgillivray@newman.ac.uk

Les résultats suggèrent que ces constructions peuvent exacerber incertitude, changement et difficultés chez le personnel et qu'il y a des aspects de l'identité professionnelle, complexes et durables, qui peuvent influencer les perceptions. Les changements imposés dans la formation, l'évaluation, les qualifications, les croyances anciennes, évidentes dans les discours, les idéologies et les pratiques quotidiennes contribuent aussi à la construction de l'identité professionnelle.

Les implications pour la pratique consistent en un besoin de reconnaître la complexité de l'identité professionnelle et donc les besoins de certains personnels lorsqu'ils sont amenés à se professionnaliser. Il est aussi soutenu que la voix des personnel a été absente historiquement et que les réformes actuelles donnent une occasion pour l'entendre et lui répondre.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: In England wurde von der Politik kürzlich der neue Status des 'Early Years Professional' geschaffen; 'Professionalisierung' den im Feld Tätigen dadurch aufgedrängt. Die politische Aufmerksamkeit für diejenigen, die mit jungen Kindern arbeiten, wächst. Dieses neue Interesse wirft Fragen auf; etwa über die Sichtweise der Praktikerinnen selbst, wenn es um ihre Aus- und Weiterbildung, formale Qualifikation und Arbeit geht. Im Zentrum von Reformen und öffentlicher Diskussion zu stehen, kann das Bild, das Frühpädagoginnen von sich selbst haben – ihre kollektive und individuelle Identität – durchaus erschüttern.

Die vorliegende Studie untersucht mithilfe eines diskursanalytischen Ansatzes historische und aktuelle Texte, um Diskurse herauszustellen, die möglicherweise zur Konstruktion professioneller Selbstbilder beigetragen haben. Der von Tucker vorgeschlagene theoretische Rahmen professioneller Identität ist dazu hilfreich in seiner Anerkennung der Beiträge vorherrschender zeitgenössischer Diskurse zur Konstruktion professioneller Identität.

Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass die so entstehenden Bilder Unsicherheit, Veränderung und Belastung für die Beschäftigten verstärken, dass es aber auch komplexe und dauerhaft wirkende Aspekte professioneller Identität gibt, die die Wahrnehmung beeinflussen. Verordnete Veränderungen von Ausbildung, Beurteilung und Qualifikation tragen dabei ebenso zu den Konstrukten professioneller Identität bei wie Überzeugungen, die sich in den Diskursen dauerhaft halten, Ideologien und tägliche Praxis.

Für die Praxis ergibt sich daraus die Notwendigkeit, die Komplexität professioneller Identitäten anzuerkennen, und damit verbunden auch die Bedürfnisse einiger Beschäftigter auf dem Weg zu ihrer Professionalisierung. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Stimmen der Praktiker in der Vergangenheit nicht präsent waren, dass aber die aktuelle Reform eine Gelegenheit bietet, dies zu ändern.

RESUMEN: Políticas recientes en Inglaterra han creado la nueva condición de 'Profesional pre-escolar', imponiendo así la profesionalización de la fuerza de trabajo pre-escolar. El aumento del interés político en quienes trabajan con niños, hace preguntarse cuales son las respuestas de los prácticos al debate acerca de su preparación, educación, calificaciones y trabajo. Como se perciben los prácticos pre-escolares a si mismos, sus identidades individuales o colectivas, puede estar al centro de la discusión y la reforma.

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo estudiar textos históricos y recientes, usando análisis de discursos, para poner al descubierto los discursos que pueden haber formado y contribuido a la construcción de las identidades profesionales de la fuerza de trabajo. Un marco teórico de identidad profesional propuesto por Tucker es útil para reconocer como discursos contemporáneos y prevalecientes contribuyen a la construcción de identidades profesionales.

Resultados sugieren que las construcciones pueden exacerbar la incertidumbre, el cambio y la lucha para la fuerza de trabajo, y que hay aspectos complejos y duraderos de la identidad profesional que pueden influir en las percepciones. Cambios impuestos en la capacitación, evaluación y calificaciones, creencias evidentes en los discursos, ideologías y práctica diaria también contribuyen a construir identidad profesional.

Las implicaciones para la práctica son una necesidad de reconocer la complejidad de la identidad profesional y por ello las necesidades de algunos miembros de la fuerza de trabajo que se están moviendo hacia la profesionalización. Se argumenta además que la voz de la fuerza de trabajo ha estado históricamente ausente, y que la actual reforma implica una oportunidad para escuchar y responder.

Keywords: professional identity; early years workforce; early years practitioners; discourse analysis

Introduction

How do members of the early years care and education workforce in England perceive their identity as a 'professional'? The need to ask such a question has been exacerbated by recent government policy development of children's services in England with the introduction of the status of Early Years Professional in 2006 (DfES, 2006; see also Moss 2003, 2006; Osgood 2006). The vision to reform and develop the early years workforce in England provides an opportunity to reflect on past discourse and how it may have shaped the sector workforce as it is today.

Terminology that identifies those who are the early years workforce is confusing (practitioner, nursery worker, nanny, child-carer, nursery nurse), so a multiplicity of titles may have contributed to confusion about identity, creating uncertainty as to what the various titles, roles and responsibilities mean. The research reported here intends to provide the backdrop for continuing research with early years practitioners to investigate their own constructions of professional identity.

The desire to conduct research into professional identity within the early years workforce was born out of frequent and numerous conversations with both students undertaking early years qualifications in colleges of further and higher education and others more peripheral to the workforce (such as advisers and careers teachers). Some students had many years of experience, others were moving from compulsory education into training at sixteen years of age. Conversations suggested that there are variations in constructs of professional identity within and beyond the workforce, and discourse analysis was intended to begin a process of exploration of constructs. Debate on what constitutes professional identity will be considered as part of the review of literature that follows. The aim of the research was thus to begin the process of deconstruction of professional identity by exploring historical documents containing discourse relating to the early years workforce.

A brief context

The development of the early years workforce in England has been influenced by the historical separation of those who care for babies and young children and those who educate them (Sylva and Pugh 2005). The history of childhood provides insight into past perceptions of children as small adults, in need of training in order to take their place in the world of 'grown ups', for example (Aries 1962). Other images and constructs may enhance an understanding of how those who cared for children were seen as minders, a low-status role that mirrored the low status of children in society (Cohen et al. 2004). Constructs of

children and childhood and those who work with children are woven together from cultural and economic strands within society. Texts that explore childhood in western societies include James and Prout (1990), Kehily (2004), and Jenks (2004). An analysis of images and constructs of teachers in the USA and the United Kingdom (Weber and Mitchell 1995), and the role of the Victorian governess (Hughes 1993), provide insight into the struggles arising from stereotypical images, conflicting demands and expectations experienced by both groups.

In the late 1990s, as part of the National Childcare Strategy in England (DfEE 1998), which set out the newly elected Labour government's vision for families and childcare, the amalgamation of care-based services with education posed several challenges. For example, pay, status and conditions for employees in care services were inferior compared with those in the education sector who generally had higher pay, longer holidays and a shorter working day. Key events such as the Second World War and the Laming Report (2003) have also had significant impact on demand for and provision of childcare and education services, resulting in unification and reconfiguration. Such events inevitably impact on the workforce too, as fundamental ways of working are challenged and can lead to problematisation. The language of 'reform' suggests a need for change and improvement; that what had gone before was not 'good enough'.

Tucker (1999) argues that problematisation arises from historical influences, and this includes media, research and policy portrayal. In the field of early years, current discourse relates to affordable childcare, reform of the early years workforce, children who achieve the five outcomes stated within Every Child Matters (DfES 2003), meeting the needs of working parents (HM Treasury 2004) and the effects (both beneficial and damaging) of childcare. Such discourse reinforces perceptions of the need for a workforce that is redemptive and offers the children it works with protection and safety (Cohen et al. 2004). Social perceptions of children and childhood that have created problematisation for the early years workforce include early years care as 'women's work' (Moss 2003), along with structural and theoretical constraints (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007). A tension arises from the dichotomy between a workforce that is construed as caring, maternal and gendered, as opposed to professional, degree educated and highly trained.

Tucker (2004, 84) proposes that any framework that examines professional identity should be able to assist analysis of those forms of discourse that are used to define particular forms of work; show how ideas are struggled over and contested at various levels of experience; and demonstrate how such matters directly impact upon the professional identities which individuals and groups adopt in their everyday work.

Tucker (2004) also offers a framework for analysis that identifies factors involved in the construction of professional identity (see Figure 1). Such factors are helpful in beginning to develop lines of enquiry for this research, and the themes of training, expectations and ideologies recur in Ellis and Whittington (1988) and Eraut (1994).

What is understood by the term professional identity is enhanced by research undertaken into the professional selves of teachers in England by Day et al. (2006). They considered past research and aimed to draw together 'the relationships between social structures and individual agency; between notions of a socially constructed, and therefore contingent and ever-remade "self", and a "self" with dispositions, attitudes and behavioural responses which are durable and relatively stable; and between cognitive and emotional identities' (Day et al. 2006, 601). These notions are also helpful, reflecting how the fluidity of identity is influenced by notions of self, emotional identities, dispositions and attitudes. Such themes are similar to those proposed by Britzman (1992, 42), who states 'the taking up of an identity is a constant social negotiation that can never be permanently settled or fixed, occurring

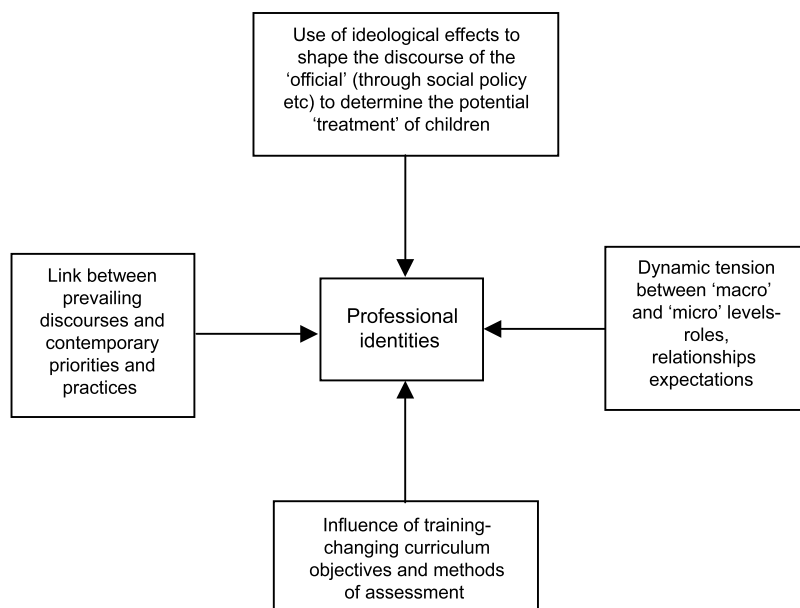


Figure 1. Factors involved in the construction of professional identity (Tucker 2004, 88).

as it necessarily does within the irreconcilable contradictions of situational and historical constraints’.

The literature thus informs us that professional identity is construed on shifting but simultaneously enduring perceptions, influenced by history, society, ideologies and discourse. Individual dispositions and emotions, day-to-day lives and relationships, training and education are also influential in creating or sustaining professional identity. Problematisation and an unsettling of the workforce are implicitly written into the dominant discourse of current early years care and education policy as change is initiated through the implementation of the Children’s Workforce Reform (DfES 2005).

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis offers potential as a research method to explore text through the themes identified in literature. Seeking prevailing discourses at different points in time, thus identifying historical influences on constructs of the early years workforce, could provide a backdrop for further research into the views of practitioners themselves. Fealy (2004) undertook discourse analysis relating to nurses in Ireland, and revealed how the public discourse was influenced by culture and socio-political influences, from his analysis of nursing periodicals from the 1920s to the 1980s. Fealy (2004, 649) sought text relating to ‘what nurses were doing and saying, including evidence of professional debate’.

Similarly, representations and constructs of young people through society and the media have been documented by Gillis (1981) and Griffin (1993). Both authors consider the impact of social history on young people, and this research, although on a significantly smaller scale, attempts to explore texts that may reflect societal changes in need and demand for childcare and education and any resultant impact on what is written about the workforce that provides the care and education. Thus, discourse analysis seems to offer a line of enquiry in the search for equivalent discourse relating to early years professionals.

Osgood (2006) has presented a deconstruction of discourse related to current (as opposed to historical) policy on early years workforce reform, and sought to expose how the discourse used in policy documents reinforces ‘certain discursive truths, in this instance around what it means to be a professional in early childhood education and care’ (Osgood 2006, 7). Truth as well as knowledge and power are critical in the debate, as reinforced by Swingewood:

Discourse is a form of power exercised by particular social groups; discourse decides ‘who’ speaks and what they say, for no one has the right to say anything. ... Hence power and knowledge are joined. As social practices put knowledge to work, it is the discourses that produce truth. (Swingewood 2000, 197)

What was written about the workforce, by whom and for whom, and indeed what has not been written, therefore warrants exploration. Constructs of those who work with young children can be contested, once we examine what we may have accepted previously as what we know: making the familiar strange (Delamont 2002). The research is not intended to emancipate or liberate the workforce from the constraints of dominant discourse. Instead, it is hoped that some reproduction of texts might create opportunities for deconstruction and consideration of recurring themes, commonality and contradiction.

Initial research determined the two parameters that made the tasks of seeking texts manageable and focused. First, texts would relate to the early years care and education workforce in England (as there are differences across the United Kingdom; current workforce reform policy relates to England only). Second, the dates between 1940 and the current date were selected, in order to focus on comparatively recent research, changes and developments that have occurred since World War II. Initial scrutiny also revealed the range of nomenclature by which the workforce was called – hence the inclusion of the first research question below.

Sources that provided historical documentary evidence of discourse pertinent to the early years workforce were selected with reference to university library catalogues, specialist magazines for early years practitioners, academic journal articles and their reference lists, government policy documents and reports, electronic bibliographic databases and *Hansard* (the record of parliamentary debate at Westminster).

The following three questions were designed to elicit information from the documents that would highlight vocabulary, terminology and themes that seemed to be related to the issues revealed in the review of literature. The research required the identification of pages or sections of texts that offered some relevance or response to them.

- (1) What terms are used to identify members of the early years workforce (who are not teachers)?
- (2) What levels of training, qualifications, type of employment, knowledge, understanding and skills and personal qualities are explicit or implicit within the documents?
- (3) What discourse relates to status and gender?

The examination of texts has assumed transparency in content, and is thus open to critique. Texts are ‘socially produced’ and ‘documents must be skeptically read and examined in their social context’ (Delamont 2002, 123). It is also acknowledged that the researcher cannot be without bias and position in the selection of sources and sections of text for consideration, but, as Delamont (2002, 125) suggests, ‘It is important not to despise any documentary source, because however “edited”, “censored” or “trivial”, it can lead to fresh questions for the researcher,’ providing some justification for methodological decisions.

Terminology

It became apparent that the sources located for the earlier decades, from the 1940s through to the 1960s, had scant mention of the early years workforce, other than teachers or nannies. Such a paucity of mention suggests invisibility of those providing care and education in settings other than schools or private homes, and that the children who were receiving care and education did so from an anonymous workforce. This has implications for the identity of those working to support children's learning in care-based settings and pre-schools, for example. Table 1 below shows terms used to identify the workforce in texts such as *Nursery World* magazine, textbooks, government policy and academic journals.

The range of terms presented in Table 1 suggests change arising from linguistic trends (the change from nannie to nanny from the 1980s to the 1990s, for example), ambiguity (vague titles such as 'speaking adults' and 'adults' or 'other adult staff') and uncertainty (as to what the term 'pedagogue' means, or just 'workforce') as terms differ from one decade to another and lack consistency (other than including the word 'nursery'). Change may also be a reflection of key policy developments. The expansion of nursery education in the 1970s followed by the National Childcare Strategy at the end of the 1990s has been significant in the impact on provision in England. The term 'nursery nurse' seemed to become unfashionable after the 1980s, possibly due to the connotations of a role that demanded no more than an ability to 'wash paint pots'. The terms in Table 1 were from texts written by authors who were academics, researchers and policy writers – thus people who were not members of the early years workforce. It could be argued that the writers did not have a shared and universal discourse on nomenclature, and so resorted to generic terminology (workers, adults) so as not to offend or exclude those who did not fit the specific title of nursery nurse, for example.

In the 1970s, there was increased availability of childcare and different types of places where early years practitioners worked. In the 1990s, terms may be more varied, general and generic to encompass those members of the workforce who may be working in a voluntary or unqualified capacity. The number of people working in a voluntary capacity with young children is uncertain, and their role, status and membership of the early years workforce adds to the complexity of knowing who the workforce is and how they should be known. Cameron (2004, 17) makes a plea that 'There is a strong case for developing a unifying title to refer to these "children's workers" and for a new language to reflect an emphasis on an integrated pedagogical approach.'

Breadth in nomenclature in an attempt to be inclusive could therefore add to the uncertainty for members of the workforce, avoiding the identification of a clear title or name. Despite attempts to rectify this situation when the Children's Workforce consultation

Table 1. Terms used to describe the workforce.

Decade	Terminology
1950s	Nursery school helper
1960s	Nursery assistants
1970s	Nursery matron, childminders, qualified nursery nurses, NNEB trained personnel, nursery nurses
1980s	Adults, other adult staff, nannie
1990s	Those working with young children, workers, professionals, nursery staff, staff, other adults, those working with under fives, nanny
2000s	Speaking adults, practitioners, nursery nurses, day nursery workers, workforce, workers, early years workforce, early years professionals, pedagogues, 'new' teachers

(DfES 2005) sought views on ‘pedagogue’ or ‘new teacher’ models, the title Early Years Professional was the outcome, rejecting both. More recent terms suggest that professionalism was not apparent in earlier decades; ‘practitioners’, ‘professionals’ and ‘new teachers’ have been introduced, but not without debate (cf. Adams in this issue).

Becoming an early years practitioner: training, education, qualifications, personal qualities, status and gender

Selected texts on issues related to becoming an early years practitioner (training, qualifications, education, status, personal and professional qualities, gender) were intended to provide insight into how others construed aspects of the workforce, who they should be and what they did. Table 2 indicates discourse articulated by academics, researchers, policy writers and others on such issues, selected for exploration in response to questions 2 and 3 above.

Table 2. Discourse on issues related to becoming an early years practitioner: training, education, qualifications, personal qualities, status and gender.

Decade	Text
1940s	‘Women were carefully chosen for their personal and practical experience of the mothering of young children. Where possible they were womenfolk who had had children of their own, and whose children were growing up’ (Stross 1946, 701).
1960s	‘The status and salary for aides and nursery assistants would be superior to that of welfare and meals assistants’ (Plowden 1967, 331).
1970s	‘You are responsible and practical, with a sense of humour and a real liking for children – the naughty ones as well as the sweeties’ and ‘It is a student’s temperament that counts, along with good sense’ (Elias 1972, 14). ‘They are not grasping money (no-one gets prosperous on illegal minding); ... they are providing a sadly necessary but very low-grade service’ (Jackson 1973, 523). ‘some concern has been felt about the adequacy of existing courses for work which call for maturity, special skills and more than a little knowledge of child development and family relationships’ (Kellmer Pringle and Naidoo 1975, 132).
1980s	‘Are you kind, loving, sympathetic and yet firm with young children?’ (Turnor 1984, 9) ‘Too often the nursery nurse issue is swept under the carpet ... Nursery nurses host a cluster of grievances, both real and imagined, and imposed and self-inflicted’ (Heaslip 1987, 34). ‘we cannot ignore the importance of training as a source of information and ideas about child development and pedagogic techniques appropriate for children aged under five’ (Osborn and Millbank 1987, 45). ‘she must be warm and outgoing and sensitive to the needs of others. Coexisting with her maturity there must be a childlike relish for the joy of playing’ (Henderson and Lucas 1989, 96).
1990s	‘The standards of training and qualifications should remain high at each stage. Working with young children is a complex and demanding task – it requires a team of professionals who are appropriately trained to adopt a variety of roles and responsibilities’ (Ball 1994, 58). ‘a view exacerbated by differences in pay and conditions of employment between qualified teachers and permanent day nursery staff’ (Audit Commission 1996, 69).
2000s	‘We need to do more to ensure that working with children is seen as an attractive career, and improve skills and inter-professional relationships. Many of those who work with children ... feel undervalued, and in some cases under siege’ (DfES 2003, 22). ‘Working with pre-school children should have as much status as a profession as teaching children in schools’ (HM Treasury 2004, 4).

Repeated demand for improved training and qualifications structure since the 1970s is apparent (Plowden 1967; Osborn and Milbank 1987; Ball 1994; Audit Commission 1996), and reinforces a sense of lack of action and strategy in addressing the need to improve training, education, qualifications and career structure for the early years workforce over past decades. The Children's Workforce Reform (DfES 2005) is the most recent political response to bring about such change, and the development of an integrated qualifications framework (IQF) may address accessibility and progression in the future, but questions remain as to what the views of practitioners are in terms of how reform is meeting their individual or collective needs. Tensions may arise if members of the workforce sense an imposition of training and qualifications requirements, where their own preference is to remain unqualified and enjoy the challenges of their job without the pressure of study and training. Further research could seek to discover whether such tensions exist. The language presented in the examples in Table 2 is of what is *needed*, what *should* be done, what *cannot be ignored*, in terms of training and qualifications. It is the language of rhetoric; the reality is yet to be achieved as reform aims to create a graduate workforce. If there is a continuing need to recruit more into the early years workforce in England to staff the increasing numbers of children whose parents work or require childcare, but at the same time staff are leaving for reasons such as low pay and poor conditions (Bertram and Pascal 2001; Cameron et al. 2001), the challenge is to create a model that accommodates a workforce that becomes attractive to all.

Gender is inextricably tied into the early years workforce: if the workforce is largely made up of women, some of whom will be mothers, is there inherent tension between the role of caregiver to a child whose mother has left to go to work, and the role of mother who should be at home to bring up her children (Cohen et al. 2004; Eckert 2004)? It could be concluded that prior to recent times, assumptions were made that it was only necessary to be a mother to become a member of the workforce (Stross 1946) and not to be able to meet any other prerequisites (Fealy 2004). Thus stereotypes that caring for young children is an easy job and can be done by anyone with the desired prerequisites are perpetuated (frequently recounted anecdotally, but also reinforced by Liddle 2006). Similar stereotypes of female teachers of young children (amongst others) are examined in images, film and text by Weber and Mitchell (1995). Being maternal, being a mother, a liking for children, having good sense, being kind and loving, being warm and sensitive: such is the discourse of what is desirable when working with young children. The authors again are predominantly researchers, academics and policy writers, but there are also voices of experts included here; those who wrote articles in *Nursery World*, for example.

What impact can such discourse have on those who read the articles and magazines where they are located? Fairclough (2003, 206) suggests there are three ways in which discourse figures in social practices: first, language used in our job role; second, representations in text, social discourse and images that we incorporate into what we say and do (a recontextualisation); and third, discourse 'in the constitution of identities'. It is the constitution of identities within the discourse of dispositions and qualities, such as being maternal, kind and loving, that has created the role of what it means to be an early years practitioner, and it has consequently been acted out by the workforce since the 1940s and 1950s. Fairclough (2003, 207) reinforces the role of discourse in representing 'How things are and have been.' He continues, suggesting that imaginaries in discourse can materialise, and people can come 'to "own" discourses, to position themselves inside them, to act and think and talk and see themselves in terms of new discourses' (Fairclough 2003, 208). Thus constructs of what it means to be an early years practitioner may influence career choices made by those becoming an early years practitioner. Decisions may be made because individuals consider themselves to possess the desired qualities, or they aspire to possess such qualities.

Discourse relating to other prerequisites includes to be knowledgeable (Kellmer Pringle and Naidoo 1975), particularly to know about child development, to have an inherent ‘talent’ and almost to have childlike qualities themselves (Henderson and Lucas 1989) in order to be an effective worker. The discourse in Table 2 reinforces the perception of a workforce that is childlike in itself, has an ability to play, has a certain temperament (that is not articulated) and has an ability to like all children. Changes in the prerequisites to be an early years practitioner could arise from the discourse in policy, a reflection of societal changes of childhood and the needs of children (Gittins 2004; Jenks 2004), as well as the emerging co-construction of the role of childhood professionals as ‘a vital one, a valued one, and as one of social, cultural, educational and political importance’ (Oberhuemer 2005, 14).

The interface between new discourses and historical influences are acknowledged by Wenger (1998, 47), who states that practice when done ‘in a historical and social context gives structure and meaning to what we do’. It could be argued that tensions may exist between early years practitioners who made career choices to join a workforce whose prerequisites were maternal and caring personal qualities (the discourse dominant in the 1940s through to the 1970s), and those who more recently have aspirations of career possibilities into management and leadership instead, articulated through new discourses (in the 1980s to 2000s). Struggles for the workforce emerge here, accompanied by the issue of status.

Discourse relating to rates of pay and status reinforce a low position in a hierarchy, often in comparison to teachers (Cameron et al. 2001; Cameron, Owen, and Moss 2001). Authors talk of being *under siege* and *under-valued*: a language of inferiority and conflict. Resentment and struggles to maintain a low-paid job have been articulated by childcare students: ‘Childcare work was being seen, they felt, as a “vehicle” for delivery of labour market objectives, and not as a valuable career in its own right’ (Cameron et al. 2001, 20). Students had also recognised that ‘low pay was part of the low valuation, but other indicators of low value were feeling “taken for granted” or even “unimportant” by some parents, employers and wider society’ (Cameron et al. 2001, 20).

It is useful to return to the discourse analysis of workforce reform policy undertaken by Osgood, as she echoes a similar call by Siraj-Blatchford (1993, 393), for a ‘less reverential attitude to government proposals’ in the context of professional identity of early years teachers. Osgood concluded that ‘Practitioners have at their disposal an opportunity to subvert and resist prevailing and dominant understandings of their professionalism’ (2006, 12) as the present workforce reform in England may provide openings for challenge and change.

Conclusion

What has discourse revealed in terms of insight into the professional identity of the early years workforce, specifically in terms of nomenclature, training, education, personal qualities, status and gender? The definition of what a professional is suggests that it requires a high level of training and education (Ellis and Whittington 1988; Eraut 1994). This is an aspiration that is only now becoming within the grasp of the early years workforce. The unheeded demand articulated within the discourse for improved status and training, however, suggests past voices went unheard. At the time of writing, the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) are investigating whether early years practitioners who have achieved Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) are earning more than those without; so longer term outcomes may reveal whether increased status has any impact on pay.

Uncertainty and ambiguity are inherent in the daily lives of early years practitioners, not least resulting from a rapid pace of government-imposed change, but also arising from

discourse that revealed the absence of an established job title that identifies who they are. There seems to be no other profession where such uncertainty has existed: job titles such as nurse, teacher, social worker, probation officer, youth worker are well established and understood by society. Early years practitioners currently struggle with a range of vague and ambiguous titles.

Invisibility may also be sustained through lack of voice and presence in policy and discussion. Changes over time reveal discourse that ranges from subversion (illegal mind-ing) to resentment (having grievances about relative status compared with teachers, for example). There is a risk of workforce reform policy being imposed on the workforce without their approval or agreement (despite opportunities for consultation) and for ideologies (those of the policy writers and implementers, compared with the workforce themselves) as to what kind of a workforce is needed to be in conflict with each other.

Recurring themes of being expected to have a liking for children and play in order to become a practitioner and low status have also been revealed in discourse. Siraj-Blatchford (1993) cites the vulnerability of women, the influence of media and modern misconceptions as exacerbating factors in the lack of status of early years work. Issues of status and gender are deeply embedded culturally and sociologically. Some (such as Liddle 2006) believe that being an early years practitioner is the same as being a parent, and are dismissive of the need to promote the status and training of the workforce. A struggle is emerging and the power to bring about change lies with the workforce and its supporters.

However, it is acknowledged that what is presented here is a small, subjective sample of a much wider range of literature. Questions of audience, position and prejudices, power and postmodern perspectives have not been addressed. Future research will seek the views of practitioners themselves in order to explore the complexity of factors that contribute to professional identity. What has emerged from the scrutiny of past and current discourses relating to the early years workforce in England is how embedded constructs are, and that for change to be initiated (if the workforce itself desires change) there may need to be a period of introspection and reflection, in order to create a model of a workforce that belongs to the workforce itself, with constructs of professional identity informed by a shared vision and understanding.

References

- Adams, K. 2005. What's in a name? University of Strathclyde. Paper presented at the EECERA Conference, September 1-3, in Dublin, Ireland.
- Aries, P. 1962. *Centuries of childhood*. London: Cape Publishing.
- Audit Commission. 1996. *Underfives count. Management handbook*. London: The Audit Commission.
- Ball, C. 1994. *Start right. The importance of early learning*. London: Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.
- Bertram, T., and C. Pascal. 2001. The OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care: Background report for the UK. <http://www.oecd.org/>.
- Britzman, D.P. 1992. The terrible problem of knowing thyself: Toward a post-structural account of teacher identity. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 9, no. 3: 23-46.
- Cameron, C. 2004. Building an integrated workforce for a long-term vision of universal early education and care. London: Daycare Trust Policy Paper No 3.
- Cameron, C., A. Mooney, C. Owen, and P. Moss. 2001. Childcare students and nursery workers: Follow up surveys and in-depth interviews. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, DfES Research Report No 322.
- Cameron, C., C. Owen, and P. Moss. 2001. Entry, retention and loss: A study of childcare students and workers. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, DfES Research Brief No. 275.
- Cohen, B., P. Moss, P. Petrie, and J. Wallace. 2004. *A new deal for children?* Bristol: The Policy Press.

- Dahlberg, G., P. Moss, and A. Pence. 2007. *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Day, C., A. Kington, G. Stobart, and P. Sammons. 2006. The personal and professional selves of teachers: Stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 4, August: 601–16.
- Delamont, S. 2002. *Fieldwork in educational settings*. London: Routledge.
- Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). 1998. *Meeting the childcare challenge*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES). 2003. *Every child matters*. London: DfES/SureStart.
- . 2005. *Children's workforce strategy*. London: DfES.
- . 2006. *Children's workforce strategy: The government's response to the consultation*. London: DfES.
- Eckert, P. 2004. The good woman. In *Language and women's place*, ed. M. Bucholtz. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elias, E. 1972. So you want to work with children. *Nursery World*, 13 January.
- Ellis, R., and D. Whittington. 1988. Social skills, competence and quality. In *Professional competence and quality assurance in the caring professions*. Chapter 10. ed. R. Ellis. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Eraut, M. 1994. *Developing professional knowledge and competence*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Fairclough, N. 2003. *Analysing discourse*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fealy, G.M. 2004. "The good nurse": Visions and values in images of the nurse. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 46, no. 6: 649–56.
- Gillis, J.R. 1981. *Youth and history*. London: Academic Press.
- Gittins, D. 2004. The historical construction of childhood. In *An introduction to childhood studies*, ed. M.J. Kehily. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Griffin, C. 1993. *Representations of youth*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Heaslip, P. 1987. Does the glass slipper fit Cinderella? Nursery teachers and their training. In *Roles, responsibilities and relationships in the education of young children*, ed. M.M. Clark. Occasional Publication Number 13, Educational Review. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Faculty of Education.
- Henderson, A., and J. Lucas. 1989. *Pre-school playgroups: The handbook*. London: Unwin.
- HM Treasury. 2004. *Choice for parents, the best start for children: A ten-year strategy for children*. London: HM Treasury.
- Hughes, K. 1993. *The Victorian governess*. London: The Hambledon Press.
- Jackson, B. 1973. The childminders. *New Society*, 29 November.
- James, C. 2005. *Childhood*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- James, C., and A. Prout, eds. 1990. *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*. Basingstoke: Falmer.
- Jenks, C. 2004. Constructing childhood sociologically. In *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*, ed. M.J. Kehily. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kehily, M.J., ed. 2004. *An introduction to childhood studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kellmer Pringle, M., and S. Naidoo. 1975. *Early child care in Britain*. London: Gordon and Breach.
- Laming Report. 2003. *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: Report of an inquiry by Lord Laming* (Cm 5730). London: The Stationery Office.
- Liddle, R. 2006. Stupidity has its place. *The Sunday Times*, 6 August.
- Moss, P. 2003. Beyond caring: The case for reforming the childcare and early years workforce. Facing the Future Policy Paper No 5. London: Daycare Trust.
- . 2006. Structures, understandings and discourses: Possibilities for re-envisioning the early childhood worker. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7, no. 1: 30–41.
- Oberhuemer, P. 2005. Conceptualising the early childhood pedagogue: Policy approaches and issues of professionalism. *European Early Childhood Research Journal* 13, no. 1: 5–16.
- Osborn, A.F., and J.E. Millbank. 1987. *The effects of early education*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Osgood, J. 2006. Deconstructing professionalism in early childhood education: Resisting the regulatory gaze. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7, no. 1: 5–14.
- Plowden, B. 1967. *Children and their primary schools*. London: HMSO.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. 1993. Educational research and reform: Some implications for the professional identity of early years teachers. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 41, no. 4: 393–408.

- Stross, B. 1946. Young children (care and education). Parliamentary debates, 6 December. *Hansard* 5th ser., vol. 431.
- Swingewood, A. 2000. *A short history of sociological thought*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Sylva, K., and G. Pugh. 2005. Transforming the early years in England. *Oxford Review of Education* 31, no. 1: 11–27.
- Tucker, S. 1999. Making the link: Dual ‘problematisation’, discourse and work with young people. *Journal of Youth Studies* 2, no. 3: 283–95.
- . 2004. Youth working: Professional identities given, received or contested? In *Youth in society*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Roche, S. Tucker, R. Thomson, and R. Flynn. London: Sage Publications.
- Turnor, M. 1984. So you want to be a nannie? *Nursery World*, 24 May.
- Weber, S., and C. Mitchell. 1995. *“That’s funny, you don’t look like a teacher”*. London: Falmer Press.
- Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.