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Mary A. Dyer

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Being a professional or practising professionally

Mary A. Dyer 

HudCRES, School of Education and Professional Development, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

ABSTRACT

Research (Lloyd, E., and E. Hallet. [2010]. "Professionalising the Early Childhood Workforce in England: Work in Progress or Missed Opportunity?" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 11 (1): 75–788; Saks, M. [2012]. "Defining a Profession: The Role of Knowledge and Expertise." *Professions and Professionalism* 2 (1): 1–10] into professional status suggests that this is achieved through control of a unique knowledge base, and underpinned by autonomy and agency in practice. This article considers how the government-driven professionalisation agenda for the early years workforce in England has contributed to the professional status of the graduate practitioner (practitioner within this research is defined as those who have achieved either Foundation degree (FdA) or BA Hons Early Years, without necessarily progressing to Early Years Professional or Teacher Status), or if these workers, whilst articulating a professional identity, continue to lack the power to claim such higher status for their role. Data, gathered in the form of narratives about their practice, have been analysed to identify three key themes in the way practice is discussed – registers, relationships, and power and control. Findings indicate that whilst graduate practitioners demonstrate a strongly democratic and relational approach to their professionalism, the language they use to describe their work, and their lack of collective voice, continue to undermine any claim for their occupational group to be recognised as a profession.

KEYWORDS

Early years; professionalism; register; relationships; power

Introduction

International research into the role of the early years practitioner has raised questions about their professionalism and status, their purpose in the workplace, and the support they require to develop a professional knowledge base (Dalli 2008; Oberhuemer 2008; Urban 2008; Cook et al. 2013). These questions similarly drive research in England, where successive governments have introduced changes to the role of the early years practitioner since the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy of 1998 (DfEE 1998), to address a range of social policy and economic issues. Workforce development strategies for the sector have included the introduction of standards for practice, and outcomes for children's development and learning (DfES 2003; DCSF 2008; Early Education 2012; DfE 2017a), now written into inspection regimes as a means of measuring and judging practice. More recently, changes to the curriculum framework and the qualifications

and entry requirements for practitioners have been implemented in response to issues of school readiness and improving children's learning outcomes. Little of this has been instigated by the early years practitioners themselves, but rather by those who regulate and fund them and who present the changes as an agenda for the professionalisation of the workforce.

More traditionally recognised, higher status, equally independent and originally market-led professions such as law and medicine have operated a 'from within' model of professionalisation (Evetts 2011, 407), by managing the jurisdictions (Abbott 1988) that define their practice for themselves. However, it is the politicians who control early years funding, who have imposed a professionalisation agenda on this workforce, determining their qualification, registration and regulation, and introducing opportunities for practitioners to take up degree-level professional education as well as accreditation for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS, now redeveloped into Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS)). This 'from above' approach offers ideological cover (Evetts 2011, 408) for the imposition of managerial control to ensure provision continues to comply with external regulation and meet the needs of government policy, whilst appearing to empower practitioners through access to higher level qualifications and autonomy over their day-to-day practice. This agenda reflects the control government assumes over early years provision, and its model of professionalisation promotes the use of a universalistic code for measuring development, contributing significantly to the differential value now ascribed to educational over care practices.

The separation, and accompanying privileging, of the role of educators in early years provision, is evidenced by the development of formal and *compulsory* curriculum guidance for funded nursery education (QCA/DfEE 2000) and a different set of care standards for inspection for all other types of early years provision (DfES 2003) and by the later development of *advisory* practice guidance for provision for younger children (DfES 2002), and the lower qualification requirements for child-minders than for staff working in group-based provision (DfE 2017a). Current job titles of Early Years Educator and EYTS with its General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) requirements continue to privilege educational roles, with the early years teacher being presented as the highest attainable rank in the early years workforce (Nutbrown 2012; DfE 2013). This constructs a concept of professionalism, which emphasises an overtly pedagogic rather than nurturing role, requiring practitioners to focus their practice on measuring children's progress towards the Early Learning Goals in fulfilment of the government's school readiness agenda.

There has been research into the impact of degree-level professional education for practitioners, focussing on those completing EYPS accreditation (for example, Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Hadfield et al. 2011; Chalke 2013), exploring the impact on their personal and professional development of this nationally recognised status in a sector with no nationally recognised career pathway or hierarchy. This article, drawing on data from a larger research study described below, questions what the professionalisation agenda for the early years sector has offered to practitioners who have completed Foundation degree (FdA) Early Years and are still in the process of completing their BA Hons degrees, what impact it has made on how they view themselves and with what agency they determine their role. Have their studies empowered these practitioners to claim a professional status arising from specialised knowledge, and the agency to improve practice and raise quality, or have they instead reinforced compliance with an externally regulated,

politically led conception of what early years practice should be? This article also asks how the degree programme they have undertaken could be developed to build their confidence in claiming autonomy over their practice.

Defining a profession

Functionalist definitions of a profession combine status, power and practice (Saks 2012), presenting professions as groups of highly educated practitioners with ownership of a unique body of specialised knowledge (Eraut 1994), applying this ethically for the good of wider society (Kinos 2008) and exercising autonomy over what this knowledge is, and how it can be perpetuated and developed (Evetts 2003). Foucauldian understandings of professions suggest they draw their power from their usefulness to state institutions and the dominant political agenda (Saks 2012), whilst more recent neo-Weberian approaches have regarded the occupational group's control of its boundaries as a means of maintaining self-interest in terms of status, power and wealth (Kinos 2008; Saks 2012).

Professions are understood to operate as a collective with shared aims and interests, with professional status based on public recognition of the value of the services on offer (Evetts 2003). The power of a professional group lies in its control and ownership of its specialist knowledge (Abbott 1988), determined through negotiation between different stakeholders, who include the powerful voices of funders, employers and HEIs, as well as those currently in practice (Hordern 2016). Since the introduction of sector-endorsed Early Childhood Studies degrees, in 2001 (Miller 2008), there is now a growing cohort of graduate practitioners who have a deep understanding of the research, theory and policy that underpin early years practice, and the role of critical reflection in raising quality. However, with almost 80% of provision delivered by organisations within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (DfE 2017b), there is as yet no clear, nationally agreed career progression, or professional infrastructure to ensure the collective voice of practitioners is heard on these matters. Hordern (2016, p.515) describes the sector as comprising 'thousands of employers' (including the self-employed), offering provision in 'an enormous range of settings', and employing staff with 'varied qualifications'. This results in substantial variation in the terms and conditions of practitioners' employment, and job titles and roles that may be more locally and organisationally defined than determined by their level of qualification or experience. Hordern (2016) further argues that the range of professional organisations formed to represent the views of different practitioners including child-minders, Children's Centre workers, and practitioners in schools and the PVI sector, emphasises the diverse and fragmented nature of this workforce. This, combined with the different skills and knowledge developed in these different roles and work environments, compounds rather than alleviates the difficulty in hearing a single, collective voice from practitioners.

Early years specialist knowledge base

The content and articulation of the knowledge base of the early years practitioner is problematic for three reasons. First, its content is drawn from a number of different disciplines – health, psychology, education, sociology, leadership and management, and business, which practitioners draw on, integrate and apply to their complex day-to-day

practice of holistic support for learning and development. Second, it is based on an affective and emotional contact with their service users, often expressed in terms of a discourse of care which is understood to require no training or professional education, and which has previously been found to be devalued in comparison to abstract, academic knowledge (Manning-Morton 2006). Third, if professional status is to be claimed by the expression of a clear purpose of an occupational group, then the early years sector is undermined by the range of different purposes its members see for their work, and the language they use to express this, particularly with regard to their role in relation to care and educational responsibilities.

Chalke (2013) identifies emotional engagement as a key specialism for practitioners, and calls for them to develop and articulate their own pedagogical principles, in a manner that demonstrates the intellectual capacity and skill this requires. Taggart (2014) argues that practitioners need to present care as an ethical stance underpinning their practice, rather than the more superficial presentation of practitioners as substitute parents. In contrast, Moss (2006) argues that practitioners need to pull away from a language that centres on care and its associations with maternal instinct to one which considers issues of pedagogy more explicitly, as is now reflected in the current early years curriculum and the standards for EYTS (Early Education 2012; NCTL 2013). Government policy (DCSF 2004; Field 2010; Allen 2011) has moved practitioners towards surveillance and intervention roles to monitor children's well-being, promote their social mobility and improve their health and educational outcomes. However, if the variety of potential purposes of early years practice requires steering, this raises the question of whose steer this should be. It is argued that practitioners should determine their pedagogic role for themselves (Moss 2006; Osgood 2006; Ang 2014). Moss (2006) alludes to cultural difficulties in defining an appropriate pedagogical, rather than simply caring, role for the early years practitioner, since pedagogy is a term that proves difficult to define. However, this is less an argument for changing to a more formalised, measurable form of practice in support of early learning, and more one for changing how practitioners conceptualise and articulate the specialist knowledge they apply to promoting children's emotional well-being in support of their learning.

Methodology

This paper's argument draws from a doctoral study that explores how graduate early years practitioners define their roles, articulate their specialist knowledge, judge practice, express autonomy and agency in the workplace, and identify their values and ethics. The aim of the study was to explore the perceptions of individual practitioners working across the range of settings within the early years sector, based on their overall experience of working in the sector and implementing the EYFS, and their engagement with sector-endorsed HE professional education which promotes the development of critical reflection. Therefore, participants were drawn from undergraduate degree provision, rather than on the basis of their achievement of EYPS/EYTS, or the nature of the setting they worked in.

The sample of participants interviewed for the study was made up of 23 students who were completing their BA Hons Early Years qualification. They had all completed a level 5 qualification (sector-endorsed FdA in Early Years, meeting the terms set out in the

Statement of Requirement for this provision (DfES 2001). They were working in a range of early years settings, or had completed substantial work placement (over 400 hundred hours in the last 2 years), and had varying amounts of practice experience – see [Table A1](#), [Appendix](#). They were invited to participate in the research based on the depth of reflective self-awareness shown in coursework completed for their studies, including the self-evaluation of their practice. Ethical approval for the study involving University students was granted as part of the doctoral study programme requirements, on the basis of consideration of a detailed research proposal, with accompanying information and consent forms. Since the researcher knew all participants, a factor that enabled a rapport to develop within the interview process, which supported an open discussion of personal values, this necessitated consideration of particular ethical issues. Participants' personal details, including names, qualifications and workplaces are known only to the researcher, and they have all been given pseudonyms for the reporting of this research. Since there was a teaching relationship between the researcher and some participants, all interviews took place after assessment was complete, to remove any potential connection between this and participation in the study. The interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed, and to ensure the reliability of the data, and an ethical reporting of their views, participants were offered the opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy, and to withdraw from the study at any point if they wished.

Data gathering

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, constructed round the themes of what they considered their role and title to be, their constructions of good and weak practice and the role of reflection in supporting and developing practice in the setting. The interview was intended to draw out what participants considered their purpose and status to be, and to understand how they framed notions of professionalism. Since I have worked in this field as an advisor and educator rather than a practitioner, it was vital to ensure my own perceptions of professionalism did not overshadow the views of my participants. To establish greater equity between the interviewer and participants, a co-constructed understanding (Kvale 2007) of professionalism and acceptable practice was sought throughout the interviews, emphasising the participants' position as experts in their own practice, and mine as being within the early years sector, but removed from practice. This was achieved by using open-ended questions, and encouraging participants to share narratives of their practice, expressed in whatever language they chose to use. In this, what they said, and equally what they did not say, the nature of language they used to describe their work, and the personal narratives they shared (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998) were all central features in the data analysis. For example, the language used in the narratives of practice from individual practitioners demonstrated that they framed their role primarily either in terms of care or learning. This use of different registers, a term explained by (Wallwork 1969) as identifying varieties of language according to their use, offers an insight into how individual practitioners construct their own professional identity and the values they bring to their practice, regardless of how their role may be framed within their job descriptions. Consideration of the language register used by participants in their discussions of practice is, therefore, the starting point in the analysis of the data.

Data analysis

The interview data have been interrogated using the multi-layered approach of the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet 1998), which was designed to draw out the voice of research participants. Specifically, this paper uses findings from Reading 1 – intended to elicit the plot of a narrative, which also requires the researcher to consider their positionality in their research. The use of this approach has led to the identification of three distinct but interrelated themes: the language register used to describe their role, particularly in terms of its bias towards care or education; the relationships that form a vital element of day-to-day practice; and practitioners' negotiations of issues of power and control. These three together reveal how practitioners construct their professional role and the tensions they experience in meeting the needs of children and families, asserting control over their practice, and negotiating their way through a tightly controlled regulatory context. They can also be mapped onto Noordegraaf's (2007) framework for the hybridised professional, and Oberhuemer's (2005) concept of democratic professionalism. Both these combine expert knowledge with a relational and agentic approach to defining professionalism.

Registers of education and care

Within the narratives of their practice, the practitioners in this study foreground the importance of social and emotional well-being to children's learning and developmental progress. They consider their role to be that of caring for and about their charges, and seldom see this as separate from promoting and supporting learning. However, the language they use to articulate this is unsophisticated (Berthelsen and Brownlee 2007), with little to indicate that early years practice is drawn from a credible and expert body of knowledge, and thus requires an educated professional (Chalke 2013). Meg, working in a private day nursery describes her day:

the 0-2's it's more sort of care giving ... I go into work and meet greet the parents, talk to them about the children's night or the weekend ... Then we serve breakfast and then after breakfast we do an activity ... Then we have snack and then we go outside for a little play and then we come back in and its dinners ... Then its sleep time ... changing nappies throughout the day as well that goes without saying. Then after they have woken up from their sleep then we have tea

Practice is described here in terms of meeting the needs of individual children, and in language which might be easily understood by those contracting their services, i.e. parents and carers. The emphasis is on everyday care rather than learning outcomes and goals, suggesting that for very young children, routine is understood to be their prime need. Meg does not, for example, talk about other aspects of the practitioner's role, not least her understanding of pedagogic approaches, nor does she explain how regular routines can support children's emotional security and development, which might better reflect the specialist knowledge underpinning her practice (Moss 2006; Ang 2014). However, it could be argued that this might draw attention away from her emphasis on the children's physical well-being, the importance of sharing information with parents/carers in order to know the child better, and the place of care as a central ethic of practice.

Whilst participants acknowledged the specialist knowledge required for their role, they emphasised the necessity of valuing young children as unique and individual learners, whose interests and needs should be prioritised at all times, and whose voice regarding how these needs should be met needs to be respected and heard. As Rose, working in a primary school, comments, ‘A *child is an individual child, not a uniform in a group.*’ However, she offers no further discussion to situate her core values for practice within any ethical, theoretical or policy-driven framework, rendering this an example of the tacit doxa of early years practice, the importance and context of which can be taken for granted, rather than a pedagogical principle or ethic of practice.

The participants’ prioritising of child-led, free-flow play as a vehicle for learning was supported further by narratives that valued emotional well-being to underpin children’s successful learning and development, as Iris, working in a private day nursery demonstrates:

children need a happy environment to learn ... they need to come to this setting happy, I’ll smile back and that might be the only smile they’ll see all day, so they need to come to this setting and feel happy when they come here ... If that child’s not ticking any boxes on the EYFS but they’re happy then that’s more important

Although Moss (2006) has argued for the privileging of the language of education, which can more easily be seen to have its roots in academia and higher education rather than maternal instinct, Iris recognises the importance of emotional well-being and positive relationships for effective learning and is reluctant to see it side-lined. Her everyday account of her practice is, arguably, framed by a pedagogical approach based on care, emotional stability and ethical values, which, if contextualised within appropriate research (for example, Taggart 2014; Luff and Kanyal 2015), can be recognised as a statement of professional ethics, rather than the echoing of a gendered discourse of mothering for her practice.

Like Iris, Gail, who works in a Children’s Centre recognises the emotional expertise she brings to her role in supporting children through positive relationships and an affective connection, and expresses this using terminology accessible to children and their parents:

you’re replacing their main carer ... So I think to get early attachment and that bonding you’ll obviously see them settle, they’ll start to explore the environment, if they feel safe they’re going to settle much quicker.

Gail demonstrates a clear understanding of Bowlby’s work on attachment and its significance for early learning in her narrative. However, whilst she applies her understanding of research to her practice, in her discussion, even with an interviewer from within the early years sector, she does not make any reference to higher level information sources or study.

Florence, who works in a school-based nursery, explains how a play-based, child-led pedagogy could be implemented effectively without the materiality associated with formal education such as timetables, adult-led teaching, and structured assessment:

I don’t think it has to be structured as such, that play or development is cut short because we have to tidy because we have to do PE or we have to go down to the hall to sing or we have to do the structured group work, maybe that could come in between doing other things. You can do your 3D solids, shapes while you’ve got your junk modelling and do it that way and you’ve still got to have your tick list but you could still tick them off. You could do it outside, inside but you know we have to have a timetable.

Whilst Florence demonstrates a clear understanding of how to draw out evidence of a child's cognitive development and progress, again, what is missing from her account is the language of research and abstract theory to support what she knows from her practice, and the autonomy to change the operation of the setting to meet the needs of children in a way she would consider to be more effective.

Relationships

Oberhuemer (2005) argues that the forming and maintaining of relationships, both within and beyond the setting is a key element of professionalism for the early years practitioner. The narratives from these practitioners indicate that for them relationships are essential to their practice and should be positive, open, and sensitive. From their perspective, children should be valued as individuals and as constructors of their own learning, with the autonomy this requires to make choices over what and how they learn. Parents should be worked with as partners, and the emotional environment of the setting should be positive and stable. These relationships are valued and often regarded as the early years practitioner's own specialism within the setting, a skill that others lack the aptitude or time to develop, as Claire, working in a school-based nursery explains:

if it was a personal matter I found that they came to me more rather than the teacher ... some parents came to me first ... because they found it easier to talk to me [about] personal matters like divorce, if a child was upset, or if other children weren't getting along together, ... I was available to chat to them for that little more and I gave them that little bit extra time ... I think I built up a better relationship with the parents.

Relationships with parents, often referred to as 'our parents' indicating the close, positive nature of the relationship, are generally supportive and advisory, based on information sharing, reassurance, and respect, with an even balance of power that parents might not find when dealing with more formal, compulsory education provision. However, as the extract from Claire's interview suggests, the use of everyday language to acknowledge the importance of these relationships in underpinning effective practice in supporting children's progress does not foreground expertise and professionalism in explanations of practice. This suggests, again, the tacit doxa of early years practice, which emphasises the importance of positive team dynamics, as highlighted by Katy (from a voluntary pre-school), 'You can't work with children unless you have a happy team and a motivated team'. Equally, as Laura (in a private day nursery) argues, communication with parents is essential, 'You're establishing a rapport with parents, you're able to communicate with them effectively.' Were these arguments to be presented within the context of a more formal, theoretical framework, they could then be perceived as the strong statements of pedagogical principles that Moss (2006) and Ang (2014) call for, and would represent the practitioners' control and definition of their occupational knowledge base that would underpin their professional status (Hordern 2016).

Betty, who supports a teacher within KS1, demonstrated, both in her approach to the class teacher and in her introduction of a new approach to supporting learning, her awareness of the hierarchies of control within the working environment and the need to be sensitive to them:

I suggest things to my supervisor 'or perhaps I could do this with this group because I think this child might be falling a bit further behind ... so would it be alright if I took them out for 15 minutes during the afternoon and did an activity with them just to try and pull them up a bit?' ... I think it needs somebody there to identify and sometimes it's a teaching assistant because a teacher's very busy

Her autonomy as a practitioner is to some extent compromised by her diffidence, and her careful seeking of permission to offer additional support indicates her awareness of the tension between her own understanding of the children's learning needs (and its potential interpretation as implied criticism of the teacher), and the teacher's authority within the classroom. In contrast, in her narrative, her autonomy and expertise are evident in her practice and her understanding of how best to support the children's learning:

I think they got bored as well, bored and frustrated ... If they've been sat there for an hour and they're in tears looking at a piece of paper sat in the same place and they're 6, it needs to be approached in a different way, you need to say 'right this way's not working they're not going to understand it, let's try a completely different approach' which is why I took them into the hall and we used like big basket balls and hula hoops

However, the end of her narrative demonstrates her awareness of classroom power relationships when she sums up this incident, saying 'whereas I suppose I took a bit of a risk by saying "Can I have 20 minutes?"'.

Power and control

Within this final theme, the inconsistencies between the expertise of the practitioner and how this is expressed, and the power imbalance in relationships within and beyond the setting are most apparent. The narratives of these practitioners demonstrate that whilst they may exercise considerable autonomy over their own day-to-day practice with the children, they do so within political and organisational constraints and hierarchies that they feel unable to challenge, even if doing so would significantly enhance children's development and learning. In this, they face similar tensions to occupational groups such as health care professionals whose own professionalism is currently being challenged by increased government regulation and audit (Saks 2013). Florence sets this out very clearly in her point about timetables:

If we'd not had the timetable, that little boy's telescope that he'd made, his learning could have been built on and we could have gone back to it but because of the timetable and the routine, that had to stop because of the other accidents. So maybe more flexibility that way but we do have to have a timetable ... Because we're structured like school.

Florence acknowledges the conflict she experiences between the needs of the child and the needs of the organisation; despite her understanding of how best to promote learning for the individual child, she does not feel able to question the authority of organisational structure. Osgood (2006) and Chalke (2013) argue that practitioners demonstrate their professionalism by negotiating their own way through regulations and policy to determine their own identity and role. However, these narratives indicate that the study's participants see themselves to have limited organisational control over their practice, their physical working environment or the policies and rules that govern it, so that whilst these may be critiqued, they are worked around rather than challenged. When organisational

policy conflicts with personal judgement, this is met equally with frustration and diffidence on the part of the practitioner, suggesting that the early years setting is not always a meeting place of equals. Nina, who works in a private day nursery, demonstrates this in describing how, when the 'settling in policy' for a child did not work, a new approach was tried, but could not be adopted, despite its efficacy, as it would lead to logistical issues across the group of nurseries:

the parents said 'Are you able to come to our home see what she likes, can we take some photos of you and put them up? ... that member of staff actually went to the child's house with the parents, did a Home Visit, read stories to them and they took photos together so it was like family photos ... The standard is that some children just come in for visits, 1 2 3 4 however many visits they need and if they settle they settle, if they don't they maybe come for a few ... nobody has done Home Visits. We have tried to mention it to the Manager but with it being a big chain of Nurseries it's not [possible]

Both practitioners, in different but equally hierarchical organisations, when faced with inflexible structures, felt they remained powerless, despite their expertise and experience, to effect change.

The issue of recognition for higher level professional education and further qualification also demonstrates the constraints and frustrations experienced by these practitioners. They lack the nationally recognised career structure and hierarchy afforded to teachers in terms of professional qualifications, which might offer them a clear career pathway, and temper some of the inconsistencies in job titles, job descriptions and pay scales offered by the many private employers. There is considerable variation in individual employers' responses to the training, expertise and experience of their staff, which serves to emphasise the limited organisational control they have over their practice. As Meg explains:

there's a lot of settings where there is just one that has done a degree and it's not always the manager.

Level of qualification does not always equate seniority within an early years setting, so that graduates may find themselves managed by colleagues with much lower qualifications. Not only can this lead to tensions over the recognition of individual's levels of knowledge and understanding over matters of practice, but it can also lead to frustration over how higher level qualifications are viewed within a team. Laura, for example, says:

I feel like the qualifications you've got aren't recognised in any way or they're not like taken into consideration or giving you different roles or responsibilities ... I don't want to cause offence by saying I have got this qualification ... I'd just like to know I was recognised for having it

Simpson (2010), working with practitioners who had recently acquired EYPS, identified a similar resistance within their workplaces to graduate status, until it was accompanied by the EYPS accreditation. He argued that this 'bounded agency' (Simpson 2010, 11) showed that individual practitioners are constrained by the organisational structures of their setting and require a nationally recognised structure, such as is offered by the EYPS and EYTS accreditation, to confirm their status. However, whilst the current professionalisation agenda offers accreditation of a Status (EYPS, EYTS), with no mandatory requirement for staff to achieve this, and no nationally recognised pay scale for this level of

leadership and expertise, any potential this has for raising the status of practitioners is reduced.

Reflexive control of their practice is expressed with limited agency and autonomy – they know what it means to themselves to be a professional, but appear reluctant to apply this to the wider workforce or to challenge those in authority who control how they practice. Few participants were prepared to set a minimum level for their knowledge of children's development and appropriate practice, and several seemed to privilege life experience and natural disposition or instinct, and in particular parenting experience over professional qualification, lending support to Moss (2006) concern that by focusing on care, practitioners were in danger of being seen to operate on instinct rather than knowledge. That the language used to discuss and describe practice can be judged at times to be too commonplace or unsophisticated to accrue much social capital further compounds this risk.

Overall, the lack of challenge from these practitioners on issues of power and autonomy highlights the lack of collective voice within the workforce, which contributes to their lack of agency in determining their own role and identity. Whilst their narratives have much in common, they seem, as individuals, to be unaware of this shared perception, arguably because they work in small, diverse and discrete organisations, with limited opportunities to meet and share occupational concerns in any formal manner.

Conclusion

The findings in this study reflect those of other research, for example, Luff and Kanyal (2015), Taggart (2014) and Chalke (2013). These practitioners present themselves as advocates of the needs and rights of children, and demonstrate their understanding of the value of positive team working and leadership, and the importance of social and emotional well-being for education and developmental outcomes. However, they present limited challenge to frameworks or organisational practices, even when these are considered to be detrimental to children's progress and children's rights as constructors of their own learning. Their accounts of the vital interpersonal, affective element of their role in simplistic terms, rather than as the application of complex theory to practice (Manning-Morton 2006), continues to have an instinctive and maternal, rather than a research-led emphasis. By focusing their practice narratives on the emotional needs of the child, i.e. least powerful service user, and overlooking their value to those with most power (government and its various agenda), practitioners contribute to undermining their own status as experts in possession of higher level knowledge and skills.

Rethinking the model of what a profession is may offer greater potential for achieving such a status, but such models still require agency and autonomy on the part of the occupational group, particularly in terms of defining and controlling their professional expertise (Abbott 1988; Hordern 2016). Menmuir and Hughes (2004, 34, 39), in their work with Scottish early years practitioners, recognised then that 'the emerging profession will need support as it becomes more unified and finds its voice', so that it might 'articulate its professional strengths and the structural and conceptual characteristics that define it'. However, the development of such agency and unity was overtaken in England by the introduction of the EYFS, EYPS and EYTS, compounding practitioners' lack of agency with the defining of practice and practice leader skills by the Department for Education

(Early Education 2012; DfE 2017a) and the NCTL (NCTL 2013). For practitioners to address this now, they must draw upon and articulate a critical understanding of the theory and research that underpins their practice, and be confident, individually and collectively, about the skills and knowledge that enable them to speak in a unified voice.

A professional education that encourages critical reflection and self-awareness has been found to be of most value to practitioners (Osgood 2010) in increasing their confidence over their role and the application of theory to their practice. This can arguably best be achieved through the adoption of a transformative pedagogy (Mezirow and Taylor 2009), supporting students in understanding how their own workplace experience offers a valid opportunity for learning, and how they themselves can use this to participate in the construction of specialist knowledge within their field. To support this participation across the sector, practitioners need a leadership model for their workforce that emphasises consultation, and a shared common purpose, for example, McDowell Clark's (2012) model promoting the leader as a catalyst for change, a reflective, non-confrontational and democratic approach. It is arguable, therefore, that students require a professional education that is not only transformative in approach, but that also includes a critical examination of how they can work together across their sector. This is what might render the professionalisation agenda more emancipating and empowering, and demonstrate to practitioners that they, like other occupational groups seeking recognition for their services, have a responsibility themselves to ensure their voice is heard.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Mary A. Dyer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7146-2841>

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Appendix

Table A1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Setting	Early years qualification	Level	Currently studying	Experience – years
Alice	Child-minder	FdA	5	BA Hons	15
Betty	School Year 1	FdA	5	BA Hons	Placement 4
Claire	School Nursery	FdA	5	BA Hons	10
Dorothy	School	FdA	5	BA Hons	Placement 4
Eleanor	Child-minder	FdA	5	BA Hons	20 weeks
Florence	School nursery	BA Hons	6		25
Gail	Children's Centre	BA Hons	6		9
Helen	Children's Centre	FdA	5	BA Hons	3 months
Iris	Private Day care	BA Hons, EYPS	6		8
Janet	Children's Centre	FdA	5	BA Hons	10
Katy	Private Pre-school	FdA	5	BA Hons	20
Laura	Private Day care	FdA	5	BA Hons	2
Meg	Private Day care	FdA	5	BA Hons	7
Nina	Private Day care	FdA	5	BA Hons	5
Penny	Private Pre-school	BA Hons, EYTS	6		9.5
Rose	Primary school	FdA	5	BA Hons	2+
Sally	Primary school	FdA	5	BA Hons	14
Tina	Children's Centre	FdA	5	BA Hons	19
Valerie	Child-minder	FdA	5	BA Hons	5
Yvonne	School nursery	FdA	5	BA Hons	7
Zoe	Private Pre-school	FdA	5	BA Hons	7
Emily	First school	FdA	5	BA Hons	4
Hannah	Private Pre-school	FdA	5	BA Hons	5