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Professionalising the early childhood workforce in England.

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Background

This paper considers policies and strategies recently employed to professionalise the early years workforce in England. The term professionalization refers here to the process of creating a graduate early years workforce. This may have implications for such workers' training, their pay and employment conditions, their specific body of knowledge and their professional identity. Early years practitioners make up only part of the wider early childhood workforce, alongside teachers and social care professionals. Great effort has gone into this process of professionalization, without the Government either fully defining the notion of early years professionalism being progressed here, or paying sufficient attention to the possible implications of the historical routes along which different types of practice in working with young children emerged. Consequently, the historical, practical and philosophical divide that exists between early childhood care and education appears to have been strengthened rather resolved by these developments.

Early years workforce issues featured prominently on New Labour's early years policy agenda and the inter-connectedness between teaching and early childhood practice in particular was emphasised in policy documents. Nevertheless, in the 1998 National Childcare Strategy the institutional and conceptual divide between the early childhood teacher and practitioner was maintained inherited as it was from previous administrations going back to the 19th century. This fact alone provides sufficient ground to argue that the attempted professionalisation of the early years workforce in England since 1997 cannot be defined as a true reconceptualisation.

Research Questions

After briefly reviewing the recent history of early years workforce issues in England, locating these within a theoretical framework, this paper explores the new 'status' for early years practitioners of Early Years Professional (EYP). This status, obtainable to those with a degree level qualification, has its legal underpinning in the 2006 Childcare Act. Denied the status of a qualification, this new 'status' of Early Years Professional has been positioned almost in opposition to existing qualifications, such as that of early years teacher or children and families social worker. The standardised training is funded for practitioners employed by private-for-profit and private-not-for-profit early years providers, but not for practitioners working in maintained, i.e. publicly funded, schools. The creation of this new status is thus explicitly aimed at professionalising the private early years sector and by implication raising its service quality.

Does the meaning of professionalism as used in this status meet the criteria employed within sociological theories of the professions? Does it match that used in relation to other professions working with young children, such as qualified teachers and social workers? This official interpretation of professionalism appears to conflict with early years practitioners' own views on their professional identity. Therefore the introduction of early years professional status may represent a missed opportunity in progressing the professionalisation of the role of early years practitioners in England.

Methods

A review was undertaken of the relevant research and survey literature and documentation from the Department of Children, Schools and Families and from the Children's Workforce Development Council. This was coupled with empirical research among early years practitioners working as EYPs and studying on EYP training pathways is available from a small qualitative study conducted in the Midlands.

Frame

The conceptualisation of professionalism within sociological theories of the professions owes much to the work of Max Weber. In his view, professions as competing interest groups are typical of the conflicts inherent in society as a whole. Pursuing this line of argument, subsequent theorists have demonstrated how monopolisation of specific and exclusive knowledge and skills, group member solidarity, restricting access to learning opportunities and requiring accreditation to practice, continue to be employed in the maintenance of professions and professionalism. However, these can only be achieved with support and cooperation from governments, educational institutions, other professions and the public. Paradoxically, altruism, integrity and long-term professional commitment may also flourish within the context of monopolistic strategies, as the threat of competition diminishes. Finally, the restrictions on access to the professions and strong group identities may help position professionals favourably in relation to negotiating enhanced pay and employment conditions.

The professionalism criteria of 'monopolisation of specific and exclusive knowledge and skills' or that of 'requiring accreditation to practice' previously identified by theorists of professionalism, are not fully met by this new status. Two other dimensions traditionally associated with increasing professionalisation, namely professional accreditation and nationally determined pay and employment conditions, do not apply either. However, there is empirical evidence of professional commitment to professional practice, leadership and professional ideals among early years practitioners working as EYPs and studying on EYP training pathways.

Such a traditional and power-based sociology of the professions approach may overlook disempowering dynamics inherent in professionalisation practices. Given that the characteristics associated here with professional status can be viewed at least as prerequisites for professional practice and leadership, we nevertheless consider it apt in the present context. After all the prevailing definition of professionalism as used in the construction of the Early Years Professional Status in England is tested here against the criteria developed originally within the sociology of the professions.

Research findings

Overall, the most recent moves towards the professionalisation of the English early years workforce, including the creation of the status of Early Years Professional, seen from an outsider perspective, are bound to come across as complex and fragmented. Even for British observers its highly technical nature, the limited innovation it represents and its opaque policy rationale remain problematic.

The question is posed whether the current process of professionalising the early years workforce should be described as a work in progress, or as a missed opportunity. The evidence from Early Years Professionals and those on EYP training pathways themselves, coupled with the fact that many of the identified constraints are eminently amenable to being addressed at central and local government levels and by national training and professional organisations, suggests that true progress remains feasible. The professionalization of the English early years workforce can therefore be considered as a work in progress.