



FEATURE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26203/3xj8-0j89>

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To cite this article: MCDONALD, C. Supporting the Development and Learning of Children through Personal and Professional Development of Staff. *Education in the North*, 24(2), pp.56-62



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Supporting the Development and Learning of Children through Personal and Professional Development of Staff.

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Synopsis

Current Scottish Government policy, A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland, (2017), acknowledges that the skillset for this workforce differs from that required for working with older children and that quality provision for young children requires the support of well qualified staff. In the years since publication of the initial Scottish Government policy (2008) it appears that the sector still suffers from inconsistencies in pay and conditions, necessary qualifications and opportunities for career progression.

Keywords Early years workforce; professionalism; work-based degrees

Scottish Government is of the opinion that the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector can contribute significantly towards closing gaps in attainment for children and inequality for families. However, a strong theme which has emerged from a recent report (Scottish Government, 2016) is that the ELC sector requires significant overhaul to present it as an attractive, long-term career choice.

The current strategy is to raise the qualifications of ELC workers to degree level, through the BA Childhood Practice (BACP) which incorporates the Standard for Childhood Practice, (QAA, 2007, 2015) combined with registration with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). In Scotland this is part, perhaps the key part of moves to reform the sector, integrate children's services and professionalise the workforce.

This article discusses findings from a small-scale study carried out by three universities delivering the BACP, (Dunn, Johnson and McDonald, 2017). Study of the degree is part-time and can take from two to five years to complete. Students perceived that study at this level provided them with many opportunities to develop personally and professionally. It would therefore, be very easy to adopt a somewhat self-congratulatory stance. However, other issues also emerged.

Many people believe that looking after very young children is a simple and natural task that any 'normal' person can undertake, particularly women. It is about caring and needs

knowledge about hygiene and the right personality rather than academic qualifications, (McGillivray, 2008). This is then the paradox with which ELC workers are presented. On the one hand, heart, soul and passion are most definitely required for a career in working with young children but on the other hand, these same qualities can prevent practitioners from being considered as professional. The general perception is that cheerfulness and amateurish enthusiasm are seen to be all that is necessary, (Moyles, 2001).

Osgood (2012) problematised the situation as being one where at government level, a 'crisis in care' is admitted, with ensuing directives around reform of the childcare workforce. It should be remembered that the original reason for expansion of daycare in the UK was not for altruistic reasons in terms of benefits to children, but rather to encourage more mothers to join the workforce. Since then, the childcare workforce has been viewed as 'lacking', in other words, conforming to a deficit model, further aggravated by persistent low pay and poor conditions. This deficit model, often promoted through economic analysis, permits the usage of terminology such as 'skills gap' and 'upskilling the workforce' and this language permeates successive policy for education and training, with an emphasis on 'generic and transferable skills'. Policy has focused on correcting specific deficiencies (Osgood, 2009) such as lack of qualifications, rather than aiming for more strategic change likely to improve outcomes for children.

On the one hand, universities have a commitment to widening access and it is part of the push to generate a culture of learning, especially lifelong learning, at all levels. Many initiatives demonstrate a commitment to developing stronger progression routes and rates of progression into higher education, especially for students from less advantaged backgrounds and the BACP provides an excellent example of all of the above. However, as many students stated, the degree is not providing them, in many cases, with improved status in terms of pay and conditions and there is a strong risk that graduates will look upon this qualification as a route out of the ELC sector, making good use of the graduate attributes with which study has empowered them.

Lester and Costley (2010) note that the university experience can encourage students to develop beyond the level of their workplace, leaving employers unable to capitalise sufficiently well on the knowledge and skills developed. Davis, Bell and Pearce (2014) argue that the sector requires a shift to less hierarchical and more dispersed forms of leadership to ensure that professional demarcation does not inhibit the equitable delivery of services. This is echoed by the Siraj and Kingston (2015) review of provision in Scotland where criticism is levelled at Primary Head Teachers who appear to have little knowledge or understanding about the value of pre-school or out-of-school provision, or indeed of how young children develop and learn.

Whilst still in the workplace, this type of continuous professional development (CPD), founded on a social constructivist approach, is an extremely important contribution to providing an impact on practice. Burchell, Dyson and Rees (2002) argue that the impact of one person's CPD can be significant for others within the same setting, by informal means of disseminating information through low-level chat with colleagues.

Raelin (2010) discusses components of work-based learning such as action learning and communities of practice and suggests that these aspects contribute to knowledge becoming explicit rather than implicit, allowing the student to progress from reflection on their own practice to being able to situate this reflection within a wider 'community of practice'.

Raelin suggests that reflection on practice is the critical and defining characteristic of work-based learning.

Although students on BACP degrees have fewer academic qualifications on entry to university, they come with a wealth of workplace experience which enables them to make explicit links between theory and practice. This was also supported by Education Scotland (2012).

Many directives about 'appropriate' levels of qualification for ELC workers have been issued by the SSSC. These qualifications, as in the rest of the UK, can be obtained by a variety of means, including work-based degrees through Universities. However, the most important factor is that the goalposts for these qualifications keep shifting and ELC workers are faced with a myriad of choices and progression routes, yet few employers appear to have any overarching understanding of the situation.

A sensible solution might be to follow the Swedish model which requires all ELC workers to work towards the same qualification, not just those in management roles, and to actually have achieved the qualification before they are employed, as in any other profession? Many respondents to the call for evidence for the Nutbrown Review (2012a, 2012b) pointed out that in nearly all other professions staff may only be employed if already qualified, yet within the UK there exists a pre-entry requirement for small animal care courses but not for being left alone with human babies. Nutbrown argues that the status of the profession is intrinsically linked to the qualifications market. The demands we place on those on award-bearing routes leading to work in the sector reflect the aspirations we have of them. Raising the bar on entry requirements, and demanding high levels of qualification would help to demonstrate a commitment to a high status profession.

It was clear from interviews with graduates from the initial BA degrees, prior to the BACP, that they felt their professional status had not changed even although they had achieved the degree, (Hughes and Menmuir, 2002). Even if current graduates now feel more professionally

confident, politicians and the rest of society, including other professionals working within the realms of education, are far less certain. Davis et al (2014) found a similar situation with frequent references to increased pay, value within a wider audience, status, funding for study and professional recognition. The Early Years sector requires an articulate, reflexive and highly qualified workforce, since the ability to evaluate and develop policy and practice are key to any claims to professionalism (Hughes and Menmuir, 2002; Moyles *et al* 2002). It seems likely that the main source of dissatisfaction for BACP graduates is the lack of change to pay and working conditions, despite a change to job title and role, (Miller, 2008).

What remains unclear from current literature is how the qualification impacts on practice and provision. The approach of setting a standard, in this case the Standard for Childhood Practice, against which all are measured, has been criticised as merely a desire for control and consistency, (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). They suggest the raising of qualifications in this way has little to do with either raising professional status or attainment for children. It is merely a tool to enable those providing the care and education to be held accountable and a minimum standard to be consistently provided.

Urban (2008) identifies the merging of quality and professionalism as a concept to achieve policy goals and this may well be what is happening in Scotland. In particular, Moss (2006) discusses the possible exploitation of women in the workforce, as being assigned the role of technicians in a world of competing ideologies, politics, conflict, economic possibility and restraints.

Furthermore, salary level and social status of some professions have constrained their progress towards professional status. This is particularly so in the caring professions of education, nursing and social work, where it is evident that there is still a greater concentration of women. Osgood (2004) argues that the process of professionalisation in these sectors has been re-shaped from a 'male' perspective in order to gain recognition as professionals, not only because they work with the youngest members of society, but also because they are a predominantly female group.

Possible reasons for this are suggested. One is that the workforce is predominantly female but also mostly made up of working class women, where the power issues exerted by government policy contribute to a loss of identity and ensuing marginalisation for the workforce. This is analysed and explained in terms of Foucault's theory (1980) where workers become 'fashioned' through government discourse in certain ways to ensure that political and societal goals are met. These issues of power, domination and top-down control of the workforce lead to a situation where the

'power of discourse and the role of agency.....suggests that government policy is both text and discourse and that through policy, governments seek to establish a 'correct reading' or to promote certain discursive 'truths', for example, about what it means to be a professional...' (Osgood, 2006, p8).

As a result, groups such as the ELC workforce, do become marginalised by manifestation of this power, which is interpreted and subsequently accepted as the truth around an issue, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge accepted authority, and a simultaneous loss of professional autonomy ensues, Foucault (1977, 27).

In the case of ELC, the effects of this have been to increase and monitor performativity through use of reductionist systems such as audits, checklists and other tasks imposed to provide 'evidence' of quality and accountability. These measures actively work against the promotion and development of higher order thinking skills, such as creative and critical thinking, analysis, problem solving and visualisation, for children and staff. Such measures also work against a social constructivist approach to professionalism, meaning the ways in which our 'world view' are shaped not only by our own efforts, but by the opinions and ideas of others. A social-constructivist approach to learning that encourages children to learn through social interaction, to learn with support from peers as well as adults and to take ownership over their own learning underpins what is best practice in ELC and yet it is not modelled in the approach to learning for ELC professionals. Yet, Kuisma and Sandberg (2008) stress the importance of the socio-cultural aspects of learning for ELC students (in Sweden) and point out that these aspects are central to promoting successful developmental pedagogy.

During a workforce development meeting, where ELC workers were interpreting presentations by a regulatory body as yet another demand being made of them, a question was posed:

'Which other professions have to compete constantly with regulatory bodies moving the goalposts in terms of their perceived competence to do the job that they are employed to do?'

It is clear that, for the ELC workforce in Scotland, the concepts of personal and professional development are closely intertwined. CPD provision in the form of work-based undergraduate degrees can certainly promote professionalism on the part of students. However, it is unsatisfactory to note that many years on from the initial degrees, initiated by ELC students themselves, the same issues and tensions around the professionalisation of the workforce still remain.

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