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'Don't call it a workforce, call it a profession!'

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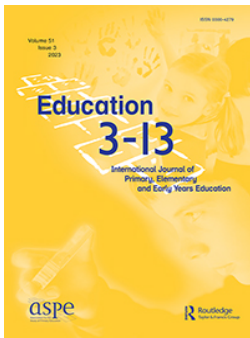
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# 'Don't call it a workforce, call it a profession!': Perceptions of Scottish early years professionals on their roles from past to future

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## ABSTRACT

Studies indicate Early Years Professionals continue to feel undervalued within their role, despite a significant shift in their perceptions from being a carer to being a professional. To improve the understanding of the role of Early Years Professionals, it is important to identify their own understanding of their roles and attributes towards the profession. We invited 21 professionals working in the Scottish context with bachelor's degree qualifications in Childhood Practice to take part in the study. The main idea was to explore how attributes and perceptions of professionals in early years provision have been evolving from past to present and their aspirations for the future. Participants were generally positive about their perceptions regarding their professional role, yet some negative attributes were evident. The data highlighted changes and improvements in the profession, however, participants reported that their role is often not recognised or valued as part of a professional workforce.

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## Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Scotland has undergone significant changes within the last 20 years. With increased regulation and inspection (UK Government 2001), the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland 2020) and the recent increase in funded hours available for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) (Scottish Government 2017), there have been fundamental changes to the role of the Early Years Professional (EYP). Throughout the various policies, guidance documents, and inspection processes the stated aims are to improve the quality of services. The qualifications of the workforce are frequently described as a key component of the provision of quality ECEC (OECD n.d.; Education Scotland 2012; Scottish Government 2017). Therefore, the knowledge, understanding, and attitudes of EYPs are important factors in delivering the best services possible for children and families. It has been indicated that EYPs become more confident during their professional learning process and reflect those acquisitions in their professional practice (Trodd and Dickerson 2019; Bleach 2014). However, reflecting on the comments and discussions amongst students studying for their bachelor's degree in Childhood Practice (BACP) programme at a Scottish university, an emerging theme is that although they feel they are developing professionally as a result of their learning, they continue to feel undervalued in the workplace. This has inspired

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current research. As discussed by Osgood (2006), enabling self-awareness and improving self-confidence regarding the professional role would help ECEC professionals understand how they can shift perceptions in reconstructing their own professional identity. The perceptions of EYPs about their own professional roles may vary according to their experiences and personal attributes and may also be influenced by external perceptions (Osgood 2010). To start exploring overall perceptions (internal and external), we first need to reveal EYPs' understanding of their own roles and attributes towards their profession to identify how these may influence future expectations. The developing skills and understanding of EYPs over time should be investigated, therefore we aim to explore these based on the voices of professionals working in ECEC in Scotland (Sheridan et al. 2009). Within this research, we would like to see the viewpoints of professionals, who have been working in this field with varying levels of experience, to gain an understanding of their perceptions on the evolving nature of their professional identities and both internal and external attributes regarding their roles from past to future.

### ***Scottish context of ECEC***

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced in Scotland with the intention of providing an integrated approach towards education (Scottish Government 2013; Education Scotland 2020). The CfE aims to support children and young people in enhancing their learning experiences, in improving their capacities to boost their mental health and well-being as well as encouraging them to become responsible citizens (Shuey et al. 2019). The CfE ranges from ages 3 to 18 and begins in ECEC settings with children aged 3–5.

Within the Scottish context, there are variations in provision. The term 'Childhood Practice' is a term that encompasses all settings and professionals working with children from birth to 16. The BACP qualification is aimed at lead practitioners and managers within settings for children aged birth to 16. Such settings can include childminders, playgroups, out-of-school care, and nurseries. The BACP students work within these settings and study part-time, however the majority work within ECEC settings (those providing care and education for children aged up to 5) which can include private, voluntary, or local authority provision. Within ECEC provision, some provide care from birth to school age, whilst other provision is from age two or three to school age. The Scottish Government funds places provided by local authority providers or those working in partnership with them (Scottish Government 2019) for eligible children aged 2, and all children ages 3–5.

ECEC settings in Scotland are under scrutiny by several different organisations. The Care Inspectorate regulates all registered childcare services in Scotland by regular inspection (Care Inspectorate 2021). The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) has a role in regulating the social work, social care and early years workforce (SSSC 2021, 2016b). If settings provide funded hours for ELC, they are also inspected by Education Scotland to ensure the implementation of the curriculum (Education Scotland 2021b). In addition to these national scrutiny and regulatory bodies, the majority of local authorities also implement their own quality assurance schemes (Scottish Government 2019).

### ***Wider context of ECEC***

In many other countries across the world, EYPs are experiencing a similar increase in scrutiny and qualification requirements (Oberhuemer 2011). The roles of EYPs in these settings require as much responsibility as other professionals, perhaps even more (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandebroek 2012). The EYPs are expected to look after the social, emotional, developmental, and as well as the learning needs of children in their care. Along with this is the requirement to work in partnership with families and other partner organisations such as schools, health professionals, and support services. There are few other professions where this wide variety of skills, knowledge, and understanding is required and fewer where the level of scrutiny is so great. Although there have been significant shifts of perceptions of EYPs in the past few decades from being carers to being

professionals (McGillivray 2008; Wingrave and McMahon 2016), the perception remains that EYPs are considered as only 'caring' and 'playing with children' (Quinones, Barnes, and Berger 2021). This perception may be influenced by the nature of the role and the play-based approaches in settings (Van Laere and Vanderbroeck 2018), however, does not take into consideration the level and range of skills required to provide this. One of the difficulties in constructing and valuing the professional identities of EYPs could be the ongoing discussion of the distinction between care, play, and education (Chalke 2013). EYPs are expected to fulfil both caring and educational responsibilities (McShane 2016), which are often presented as contradictory (Van Laere and Vanderbroeck 2018). In addition to this, play is often discussed in policy documents but solely regarding the contribution it can make to learning, rather than the importance it has on children's overall development (Education Scotland 2016, 2021a). Play is often undervalued as a developmentally valuable experience and therefore the EYPs who facilitate play may also be undervalued (Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). This separation has been recognised by EYPs as confusing and problematic (McInnes et al. 2011; Fung and Cheng 2012; McNair et al. 2021). The literature in this area suggests that the caring and playing aspect of the EYP's role is often associated with underappreciated and underpaid work (Aslanian 2015), oftentimes synonymous with 'natural' female qualities (Lofgren 2016). In contrast, education is associated with greater status and professionalism, more often associated with school-age teaching (Nolan 2020). Due to the increase in scrutiny of the profession, and the contrast in the amount of professional recognition, we specifically aimed to understand how EYPs' perceptions of their professional roles may have changed from the past to the future. We would like to understand the attributes of EYPs regarding the first role they were in at the time they started their career, the current role they engage in, and the role they aspire to. We believed that those reflections might provide an overall perspective on their professional journey. Within this, we would like to answer the question regarding what kinds of attributes EYPs would use to describe their own professional roles and reveal further details about how they perceive their profession.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on the opinions of EYPs in ECEC regarding their professional role. The research is descriptive in nature; however, we believed that revealing EYPs' views via qualitative data would provide valuable insight to improve strategies for generating support in the profession and to change the understanding of individuals related to their professional role (Jarvie 2012).

## Participants

The participants were recruited via non-random (convenient) sampling. The EYPs who have already graduated or are eligible for graduation from the BACP Programme in a Scottish university were contacted and invited to be involved in the research. We used various channels to recruit potential participants, such as alumni services of the university to access graduates, the BACP Community TEAMS area via posts and the Programme's Twitter page as well as newsletters of the professional organisations via advertisements. We received 21 responses to the questionnaire. Participants were all female with varying levels of experience from 5 to 39 years of work in the field of ECEC. It should be noted here that while ECEC is a broad field covering many settings and the age range of birth – 16, all participants, except two, stated their role was in early education working with young children, between birth and 5. If not explicit, this was gleaned from explanatory statements provided by participants. One participant was a lecturer in a Childhood Practice Programme at another university, with a background of working with children. The remaining participant did not expand enough to determine the age range of children. Nine of the initial respondents initially agreed to participate in the focus group session, however, only four of these confirmed their attendance for the focus group session.

### **Data collection tools**

Two main data collection tools were used in our study: an anonymous online survey (questionnaire) including open-ended questions and a focus group interview.

We created the online questionnaire to understand how EYPs think about their roles in ECEC from the past to the future. More specifically, the aim of the questionnaire is to reveal the ideas of EYPs by focusing on three different periods of their professional journey: past, present, and future. For the past and current roles, they reported the time when they started to work, the type of setting, the position title, the responsibilities of the role, and for how long they have been in that role. They were also asked to provide similar information for their prospective roles they plan to move in the future. For each period (past, current, and future), we also asked them to describe their profession by using three adjectives and to explain their choices based on an approach adapted from Teacher Relationship Interview developed by Pianta (1999, 2001).

The questions used for the focus group session were created based on the literature review and the professional experience of the researchers. Two members of the research team facilitated the sessions and asked eight questions about major changes affecting the profession within the last 10 years, the changes expected for the next 10 years, and how these changes might influence the profession as well as some hopes and aspirations for the future. The impact of COVID-19 on the profession and practice was also discussed during the focus group session.

### **Process/implementation**

After being granted ethical approval by the school's ethics committee at the university, the anonymous online survey link was shared with participants via Microsoft FORMS using the channels explained earlier. The participants who volunteered for the focus group session were contacted via separate e-mails to confirm their participation and arrange a suitable date and time. Two focus group sessions were planned to provide alternative dates and slots for participants' convenience. Three of the participants were able to join one of the sessions we arranged, however, we had only one participant in the alternative session therefore, we decided to ask the same questions to that participant used in the focus group session and combined the answers with the other group's data. All sessions were recorded via Microsoft TEAMS and kept as audio files and transcribed afterwards as text. All participants were allocated numbers to ensure anonymity. We removed any data pointing out personal information and/or setting information.

### **Analysis**

The data collected via the questionnaire were organised as a written text the adjectives were categorised according to the meaning given by participants. The audio-recorded data from the focus group sessions were transcribed as verbatim before the thematic analysis was conducted. Initially, transcripts were read many times by two members of the research team independently to look for meaningful units based on participants' views and to create reflective notes (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). Afterwards, the researchers worked on the reflective notes collaboratively to look for emerging similarities and differences referring to raw data. Based on this, typical patterns were identified and labelled to reveal themes. Thematic analysis was based solely on participants answers and independent from the literature, each theme has been coded based on the meaning of what is being said by the participants (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes were crosschecked by the research team to make sure the trustworthiness of the data and avoid any potential biases in interpreting the data throughout the analysis process.

### **Limitations**

It is essential to consider some of the limitations in this study. The study aimed to gather the perceptions of EYPs but only those with a Childhood Practice degree were invited to participate. This results

in a set of data which focuses only on one group within the early years profession and therefore may be perceived as limited in scope. The work context of participants is not consistent; therefore, this may impact how roles are perceived. If repeated, it may be helpful to include specific roles held by participants as there may be emerging patterns associated with this aspect. Participants stated their length of time in their roles, but we have not used this data to look for emerging patterns, although it may be an interesting factor to look for. Although we aimed to conduct more focus group sessions, we could not achieve this because of low response rates, however, this does not diminish each participant's contribution as valuable under such challenging circumstances caused by the pandemic.

## Findings

### *Questionnaire data: categories based on adjectives*

The data were first summarised in relation to past, current, and future descriptions of roles. Following this initial summary, the data were revisited to look for commonalities and differences between past, current, and future descriptions of perceptions of roles.

The survey data were then classified into three main categories: positive attributes; negative attributes; and value-based statements. A fourth category of 'unclassified' statements was added to accommodate adjectives and explanations which did not logically fit into the three main categories. The statements categorised as 'unclassified' were revisited by two researchers to ensure a shared understanding was reached, with relevant justification for our choice.

### *Perceptions of past roles*

There were 34 positive attribute statements noted by participants. A selection of these included rewarding, successful, satisfying, creative, enjoyable, collaborative, and different from today as indicated by one participant '... *it was less stressful in the past ...*'. There were 10 statements attributed to negative perceptions about their past roles including humbling, scared, and structured. In relation to the value-based category, there were four statements. Participants stated that they felt undervalued, underpaid, '... *puzzled with less pay ...*' and frustrated by low status.

### *Perceptions of current roles*

There were 23 positive attribute type statements, 11 negatively attributed comments, 5 value-based statements, and 2 unclassified statements. Statements were similar to those used by participants when describing their perceptions of their past roles and included rewarding, exciting, and inspiring in the positive category; stressful, exhausting, and busy in the negative category; undervalued and underpaid in the value-based category and, in the uncategorised category; the influence of Covid-19 and paper-work driven.

### *Perceptions of future roles*

There were 24 positive attribute-type statements, 17 value-based statements, and one unclassified statement. No negative statements were identified. Statements were similar to those used to describe participant perceptions of their roles in the past and currently. In the value-based category, 16 of the 17 statements emphasised wanting to be part of a valued profession, recognised for its unique specialism. Comparison to teaching and its associated professional status was mentioned across all time periods but was more apparent in future perceptions of the role.

In summary, participants were generally positive about the perception of their professional role, regardless of the time period, as evidenced by the abundance of positively attributed adjectives and associated explanations. In contrast, negatively attributed adjectives and explanations were less prominent, particularly in the past and none identified for the future. This may be due to viewing their past experiences as idealised or because some participants are new to the profession. However,

positively attributed statements outweighed negatively attributed ones. Value-based statements increased from the current to future periods with future perceptions focussing heavily on those statements, for example, 'being valued as professional', 'recognition of the importance of the role' and 'better paid'.

### ***Focus group data: overarching themes, sub-themes, and categories***

Four overarching themes were identified based on the participants' responses. These were Changes/Improvements in the profession, Struggles/Difficulties in the profession, Needs/Expected changes or hopes regarding the profession, and Influences of Covid-19. Each theme has different subthemes and categories as presented below and includes extracts of individuals' ideas (see [Table 1](#)).

#### ***Changes/improvements within ECEC***

This theme has been revealed based on the question we asked participants about the changes experienced in their professional role within the last 10 years. We identified four subthemes

**Table 1.** Overarching themes, subthemes and categories of focus group data.

Overarching themes	Subthemes	Categories (subcategories in bullets)
Changes/Improvements in the profession	Structural changes as a workforce	Job titles, Job roles and expectations, Pay scale
	Improvements in recognition of the profession	Advantages/strengths of having university degree External (including governmental/national bodies) recognition
	Improved training opportunities and knowledge Improved provision-expansion of hours	
Struggles/Difficulties in the profession	Expansion of hours and improvement plans	Longer working hours, Staffing, Paperwork, Poor payment compared to the work done, Challenges in Professional Development opportunities
	Pressures of requiring university degree Collaboration with different agencies and stakeholders	
	Differentiation between different types of settings (playgroups, school nurseries, local authorities etc.)	Knowledge-expertise, Payment
Needs/Expected changes/Hopes regarding the profession	External validation and full recognition	Full recognition as a profession not as a workforce Being valued and respected in/across the education field <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dedicated/Passionate professionals – not the last option as a profession</li> <li>● Recognition of knowledge and expertise of professionals</li> <li>● Equal status as other professionals in education-parity</li> </ul>
	Internal validation and recognition	Confidence with experience and knowledge Confidence with speaking up: the voice of professionals
Influences of COVID-19	Positive influences	More outdoor play Better transition of children without parents' presence
	Negative Influences	More engagement with parents Sharpened feeling of not being valued Busier and more stressful work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of staff</li> <li>● Lack of infrastructure</li> </ul>
	Further actions needed	Mental health issues of the professionals Clear/Consistent guidelines needed across settings Digital skills of professionals



linked to this idea. The first was related to structural changes, such as changes in job titles, job roles and expectations, and pay scales through the years. The second subtheme described the improvements in the recognition of the profession as explained by one of the participants

'... definitely, I think ... more and more people understand what we do now ...'

This subtheme falls into two categories: advantages/strengths of having a university degree and external (including governmental/national bodies) recognition. According to participants, having a university degree has changed how the profession is viewed both from within and externally:

'... the degree.. has been one of the major changes for the profession. I think both in terms of the, the way the profession sees themselves. They also hopefully beginning to see a wee bit of a change in how the profession is perceived externally by others ...'

The university degree has also given people opportunities to progress in their professional lives and move further in their careers. Because the government has promoted early years as a part of current provision in Scotland, the participants noted that '*... this has been really instrumental...*' in terms of motivating people in this field to feel how their work is important. The last two subthemes include improved training and knowledge and improved provision via the expansion of hours in ELC One participant mentioned that more recent and better opportunities for professionals in the field will improve professional skills and knowledge, therefore promoting their expertise as a way of being better recognised in the field. This was also described as significant in understanding child development and providing better experiences for children in the settings.

### **Struggles/difficulties in ECEC**

In the second overarching theme, there are four subthemes identified: expansion of hours, pressures of requiring a university degree, collaboration with different agencies and stakeholders, and differentiation between different types of settings (playgroups, school nurseries, local authorities etc.)

Participants reported that, because of provision expansion, they are now responsible for many children for longer hours, have many tasks to complete during the day and have many roles to carry out with increased paperwork. In addition, participants mentioned staffing as an issue in terms of consistency because of changeover rates and part-time staff. This was identified as a huge concern specifically in managing bigger teams.

Another difficulty explained by the participants is that the work pattern has changed due to the expansion, it has become difficult to implement a particular approach and arrange meetings for all staff to collaborate as a whole group. Previously, there was an opportunity to plan regular staff or tracking meetings, however recently that opportunity has been lost. One participant said,

'... EYPs ... were really struggling with that lost [time]

Another participant found this affected their working relationships, specifically in big staff groups,

'... not just because of the pandemic, but ... the human side of things in forming relationships are probably suffering a wee bit ...'

The expansion of hours had also affected participants perceptions of the value placed on their work in terms of pay in comparison to other professionals in the education field, despite longer working hours and having additional paperwork and regulation. The perception was that the effort they display, and time required for their professional development creates additional pressures. One participant expressed her concerns (which was also confirmed by others) related to the emotional strength of EYPs because of all the pressures,

'... I have real concerns about if we don't have an emotionally strong early years profession ...'

Considering the second subtheme, although having a university degree was considered valuable, the pressure to achieve the degree level qualification has added further pressure and, according to participants, is leading to people leaving the profession.

... I think ... people are ... leaving earlier than they might have done ... , 'cause they don't feel that they are able, or have the confidence to do the degree.

One participant suggested that people with extensive experience should be valued via a more vocational route rather than an academic one but with the same level of qualification.

Regarding the third subtheme, one participant identified issues around collaboration with different agencies to support children and families. The perception was that play groups/charities were not valued in the same way as schools by these agencies, therefore greater effort needed to be invested by the EYPs to obtain support.

In the last subtheme identified (differentiation between different types of settings), the perception was that those who do not work in a local authority setting are seen as being less competent and knowledgeable, despite having an equivalent level of expertise and qualifications. This is also reflected in the differing levels of pay in these settings.

### *Needs, expected changes and hopes regarding the profession*

In this third theme, two subthemes related to the validation and recognition of the profession have emerged: external and internal. Regarding the external validation, participants found the status of EYPs was not valued enough, as expressed clearly by one of the participants;

'... I just want to be recognised ...'.

They desire to be fully recognised by external individuals and agencies (other professionals in education, governmental bodies and organisations, and parents) as being professionals equipped with specialist knowledge and experience:

'... I don't think we necessarily have the status. Or the external perceptions that we would feel that having a degree should afford. I think we ... are seen as ... glorified babysitters ... not seen as professionals with a specialist body of knowledge ...'

According to participants, if their professional role was valued more, it would enable them to be equal to others with an equal voice. To achieve this, they feel it is important to have recognised qualifications as reported

'... being recognised as a profession rather than the workforce, then, you know, we need to ensure that the people we are employing, you know, have certain set of skills or qualifications ...'

They also reported more professional learning opportunities would help to improve those sets of skills to get better recognition. The clear passion and dedication to fulfil the role of EYP is described as another significant contribution to external recognition:

'... we ensure that our, the people that are coming through into the profession, really want to be in that profession and ... have the passion ...'

and that it should not be a profession that is

'... a last option for a job ... a bottom of the pile option ...'

Another need or expectation within the profession is the recognition of knowledge and expertise of EYPs by other teaching professionals. For example, recognising and valuing the information shared with schools in support of better transitions for children.

'... primary one teacher doesn't look back to see where they (children) are ... we track them ... we could let them (teachers) in ... we're laying the foundations for these children that've still got early level in primary one ... this is not a race ...'

However, participants shared their experiences which indicated that collaborative working practices and valuing information gathered was not common practice.

'... the teacher not valuing the work practitioners have done for the past two-three years with that child and least of all valuing the child's skills ... from teaching profession ... I think that's the big one that devalues us ...'.

According to participants, the foundations provided for children by professionals in early years should be better valued by other professionals in the field of education.

Linked to the above finding, participants also suggested to achieve parity with other professionals in the education field, development opportunities should equally be available for all educational professionals and should also be valid when registering to practice. Although participants perceive they have the same skills/knowledge as other professionals in the field, previously, for example, they had not been allowed to lead planning for learning because they did not have a nursery teacher title. This perception may have been improving over recent years, but there is still a lack of parity between teaching and early years roles. Participants emphasised the importance of the role of the unions in that sense. They do not think that they have strong representation

'... you know the teachers, the GTC, and whatever were very powerful and very behind their staff and so on, but I don't think, we've got that ...'.

Another subtheme identified under recognition and validation is that of internal validation of professionals by themselves. According to participants, professionals should recognise their own value. One participant said this could also be supported by those working with EYPs such as regulatory bodies and childhood practice degree providers;

'... don't call it a workforce call it a profession ... for a profession that's found its voice then probably ... I've got a part to play in that to make sure that ... we (at universities) encourage students who are practitioners to feel confident in doing that and stand up for ... here's what we do ...'.

The same participant also added how it is important for professionals working in early years to understand their role clearly and speak about this confidently. This idea was agreed by others.

### ***Influences of COVID-19***

The influence of COVID-19 was highlighted as a theme with positive and negative aspects raised, however, the comments were more focused on general aspects such as differences in transition processes and increase in outdoor play, rather than a focus on the perception of the professional role (see [Table 1](#)), therefore these aspects are not discussed further in the article. Whilst the pandemic has had a huge impact on many aspects of practice, we will focus only on the data which emphasises the professional role.

Participants emphasised how the pandemic sharpened the feeling of not being valued enough. They said they felt like they have been expected to keep going under any circumstances:

'... I think COVID has made it more apparent how we are undervalued ... we've just been expected to just keep going. Right from the very start of COVID and, other professions within education ... it's like they're protected and like we're made of steel and we're just keep going 'cause (this is) we do ...'.

The perception is that their additional work and efforts during the pandemic were invisible most of the time in comparison to schools. The staffing issues and insufficient infrastructure of the early years' profession have been highlighted even more during the pandemic where ECEC become much busier and more stressful than ever.

## **Discussion**

In addressing the kinds of attributes EYPs would prefer to use describing their own professional role, we have noticed an encouraging sense of positivity perceived by participants. Although there are perceptions pertaining to negative attributes, these are minimal and mostly merge with value-

based perceptions. The most agreed idea among participants was the need for the recognition of the profession and being valued in their roles. This was two-fold highlighting external and internal validation/recognition. Drawing out the main threads from the data, the discussion focuses on these two key areas; the need to be recognised and valued externally, particularly with regard to being seen as equal to teachers and the need to be confident about their knowledge and expertise and speaking up for their own profession.

One of the strongest themes coming out from the data is the need for recognition and validation of the role. This finding is evident at all times (from past to future); however, it is a predominant expectation for the future of the profession. Most participants felt undervalued for what they do, but all know they are doing an important job and good at what they are doing. However, they are explicitly looking for external validation, mainly from educational professionals, more specifically the teaching profession. Participants identified that they want and expect to have equal status to that of teachers for the future, exemplified in statements such as 'valued as much as teachers', and 'appreciated as much as teachers'. Some of the value-based comments suggest that participants understand they have a specialism and that the degree of BACP should be more recognised for its own value, rather than a comparison to teachers. However, participants often made these comparisons themselves. There is an underlying current of comparison. There are two regulatory bodies for professionals, depending upon the role and setting, within Scotland for those working in ECEC. All qualified teachers in Scotland must be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS 2012, 2023). Teachers must have a recognised teaching qualification such as a relevant degree or post graduate diploma. Lead practitioners or managers within registered childcare settings must register with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and must hold a Childhood Practice (or relevant) degree-level qualification. All professionals registered with the GTCS (2012, 2023) follow the Code of Professionalism and Conduct and those registered with the SSSC (2016a) follow the Codes of Practice. Each regulatory body has a separate set of professional standards yet often the roles of teacher, manager and lead practitioner overlap. The respective document titles highlight the differences between keywords of 'practice' and 'professionalism' and may influence participants' perceptions of professional value. The current difference between regulatory body and the increase in the workload resulting from more inspection processes create additional pressure on professionals in ECEC. In addition, there is a national pay scale in place for teachers but there is no national scale for EYPs (Wingrave and McMahon 2016). Because of these aspects, participants reported that they are looking for equal standards and emphasised the need for removal of disparities between the different roles. This forms part of a wider discussion about the nature of the professional role that is required to educate and care for young children and while there continues to be differing social, political, and cultural opinions, external validation may continue to be a challenge (Quinones, Barnes, and Berger 2021; Oberhuemer 2011).

In addition to external recognition, internal validation is identified as another significant factor in our study. As reported earlier, professionals working in ECEC may have some concerns related to their professional identities which might be linked to their lack of confidence or their need for approval from others. This might lead to the lack of professional voice and low level of involvement and representation in the planning of provision and policy (Trodd and Dickerson 2019; Chalke 2013; McGillivray 2008). Our data suggest how these concerns could be handled in the profession. For instance, participants described the advantages of having a university degree which helps them to progress in their professional roles and careers. It is also important to improve their competence and confidence via professional learning in developing further professional skills, knowledge, and understanding (Trodd and Dickerson 2019). This could be achieved via supervisory sessions and/or mentorship programmes which might help EYPs to reflect on their learning, to think collectively with their colleagues, to support their practice based on developed skills, and to promote confidence (Lightfoot and Frost 2015). Besides helping them to recognise their own skills and abilities, such opportunities might be reassuring for self-validation instead of external validation.

Participants identified another challenge, which they hoped would change in the future, that is staff salaries. EYPs feel the work they undertake is not reflected in their salaries. Although this is an ongoing debate across different professions, further practices could be arranged in motivating staff and recognising their achievements. Some strategies could be used to strengthen their passion and sense of belonging ranging from equitable pay for equitable work, arranging places for children of staff in their working setting with a reduced rate, as well as regular verbal/written appreciation (Department for Education 2017). As suggested by McGillivray (2008), this profession experiences more struggle compared to any other in terms of titles and expected roles. In addition to this, there has been an increase in workload, significant changes to expected practices and over regulation. There has been an increased requirement in qualifications that EYPs should hold (Harwood et al. 2013) regardless of disparity in their status. Despite challenging circumstances, like COVID-19 which has long-term and tremendous influences on society, it is important to show appreciation for EYPs who have been working hard to support children and families in our communities in the way other front-line professionals are.

## Conclusion

The findings highlighted the need for generating support and appreciation for the Early Years profession and the importance of a shift in the perception of the work they do, including by EYPs themselves. Despite recent investments in the field, concerns still remain (Siraj and Kingston 2015). The perception and reality for EYPs are that things are not changing enough. Clearly, EYPs are seeking external validation to be valued equally to other professionals working with children; however, they have also been struggling regarding internal validation. Promotion of self-confidence about their expert knowledge and skills is a requirement to ensure internal validation and could also influence their judgements on how they have been perceived by others. Professional identity may be a significant underlying factor in this process. If ECEC is to be situated within the discipline of education, as suggested by participants, EYPs might feel a sense of belonging that accompanies their professional identity and may also raise awareness and understanding of their role by other professionals. This is not only about recognition (Lightfoot and Frost 2015) but also acceptance that there are a variety of roles which contribute towards the education and development of a child. Each role has the potential to provide a better and more holistic experience for children. Accordingly, professional identity and a sense of belonging to a wider discipline of education could become a more prominent aspect of Childhood Practice degree programmes at universities (Dickerson and Trodd 2022). More research should also be undertaken regarding the needs of EYPs and their aspirations for the future. This could not only help promote internal validation by EYPs but also highlight the essential role they play in children's lives to others. The functioning of the entire system is influenced by its components; therefore, we need to understand what kind of resources we have in the system and how valuable they are. We need to recognise the value of each partner who contributes to the system for making it a well-functioning whole. The conclusion may be that it is the system that underpins ECEC that influences professionals' perceptions about their value.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Declaration

As authors of the study, we have approved submission of the manuscript to Education 3-13.

## Ethics statement

All the ethical issues were considered for this study including approvals from the school's ethics committee and consents from the participants.

## Data availability statement

Data and materials are available for further review.

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