

Early Years Professional Status: Pilot Evaluation and Issues

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Introduction

Until the late 1990s, early years and childcare in the UK had been characterized by minimal government intervention, conflicting attitudes to working parents and provision of variable quality staffed largely by low paid and poorly qualified women. Evidence from a large scale study (Sylva *et al.*, 2003) confirmed that high quality provision and better outcomes for children are linked to higher levels of qualification in staff. In March 2006, in response to a consultation on a Children's Workforce Strategy (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006a), the United Kingdom government announced its intention to create a new form of graduate, multi-disciplinary Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) and a target of an EYPS holder in every full day-care setting by 2015. The University of Northampton was one of eleven training providers selected to pilot the assessment process during Autumn 2006. This paper reports on the outcomes and lessons learned from this first cohort to be awarded EYPS. It critically evaluates EYPS as an initiative and considers implications for the future.

Background

Lack of co-ordination and information sharing between education, health and social services has repeatedly been identified as a key factor in child protection failures. The UK government's response in the form of *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2003) set the scene for radical moves towards integration of children's services. A legal framework for integration of Education and Social Care under Directors of Children's Services was established through the Children Act 2004. The following year the government issued the *Children's Workforce Strategy Consultation Document* (DfES, 2005) with proposals for systematic work-force planning, recruitment, training, and development for all those who work with children. The proposals for early years were heavily influenced by the findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project (EPPE) (Sylva *et al.*, 2003) which demonstrated a positive correlation between the level of qualifications of staff, particularly the nursery leader, and better outcomes for children.

The proposals included the creation of a new form of multi-disciplinary Early Years Professional (EYP) at graduate level to provide curriculum leadership across the birth to five age range. EYP Status would have broad equivalence to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) but, whereas primary teachers in the UK can theoretically work anywhere in the school system, EYPs would be restricted to work with under-fives. The *Childcare Act 2006* (DfES,

2006b) abolished the distinction between care and education for children under five and created a new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) from birth to the end of August after their fifth birthday (statutory school age in the UK) with effect from September 2008 (DfES, 2006d).

Targets were set for an EYP in all 3,500 Children's Centres by 2010 and an EYP in every full-day care setting (around 30,000 settings) by 2015 backed up by a £250 billion *Transformation Fund* (DfES, 2006c). This was to support training and provide recruitment incentives for employment of graduates in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector where qualification levels were lowest.

Implementation of the EYPS strategy was delegated to the newly created Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) which was required to develop and trial by the end of 2006 "*a robust process for conferring the status of Early Years Professional Status (EYP) on those who can demonstrate the required standard.*" (DfES, 2006b: 30.)

By Easter 2006 draft standards had been sent out for consultation. The University of Northampton was selected as one of eleven pilot sites with a target of recruiting sixty candidates by September 2006.

National standards and guidance for EYPS (CWDC, 2006a), together with a 'prospectus' (CWDC, 2006b) defined the EYP role. CWDC stated that in future, only those with EYP status would be able to lead practice across the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The EYPS Validation Process

The EYPS Validation process was designed by consultants on behalf of CWDC. It incorporates four days of preparation and a half day formative 'needs assessment' (skills-based exercises carried out at a management centre), followed by a series of written tasks and production of a portfolio of supportive evidence (CWDC, 2006c). The final summative assessment takes place during a visit to the candidate's workplace carried out by a trained assessor and comprises a tour of the setting with explanatory commentary, scrutiny of the written tasks and supporting evidence and interviews with the candidate and with selected 'witnesses' in relation to how he/she meets the standards (CWDC, 2006c).

The Pilot Group

Sixty-two potential candidates were recruited as meeting the eligibility requirements for the Validation process including a minimum of an Ordinary Degree (level six) in a relevant subject plus experience across the birth to five-age range. The backgrounds of the candidates varied from recent graduates with good Early Childhood Studies Honours

Degrees but limited experience, to nursery owner/managers with twenty years experience and Certificates of Education dating back to before teaching was an all-graduate profession.

Of the original sixty-two potential candidates, 14 dropped out, before or during initial preparation days, when it became clear that the demands of assessment were not consistent with ongoing work commitments. One candidate did not show, another was eliminated at the 'needs assessment' stage and a further two dropped out prior to summative assessment due to pressure of work.

The final assessment visit was completed by forty-four candidates of whom thirty-nine were judged to have met the national standards in full.

Evaluation of the Pilot

Candidate Preparation

Feedback sheets were completed by all candidates at each stage of the process. Eighty-six percent of candidates rated the preparation days as very, or extremely, helpful (average score 4.2 out of 5).

Needs Assessment

Candidates were asked to what extent they found each of the four different exercises 'challenging' or 'enjoyable'. The most challenging (4.2 out of 5) and least enjoyable (2.9) was a timed 'in-tray' exercise (typical nursery problems requiring a response). The simulated staff interview (role play with an actor) was also found to be challenging (3.9 out of 5) though most candidates found it quite enjoyable as well (3.4) and six candidates described it as the best part of the process. An observed group discussion was reported as the most enjoyable of the four exercises (4.3 out of 5) but still rated as quite challenging (3.5). Finally, the personal interview related to standards was the least challenging (3.0) but most enjoyable (3.6). The quality of the organisation and of the assessors and actors received universally high ratings (4.7 - 4.8).

Candidates were asked to comment on what they had learned from the needs assessment experience. Comments included:

'Much to learn about working together'

'Not to be so complacent'

'Made me evaluate what I know'

'Recognised areas in which I need additional work'

'How broad my job is'

The Setting Visit

A similar system of feedback sheets was used to follow up the final assessment visit. The most challenging parts of the process were reported to be interviews with the assessor in relation to a 'critical incident' - how they handled an unplanned event - (3.5 out of 5) and in relation to meeting the standards (3.3). These were both rated as quite enjoyable (3.3 and 3.2 respectively). What candidates enjoyed most and found least challenging was providing a guided tour of the setting with a commentary explaining their role and ethos (enjoyability rating 3.8; level of challenge 2.9). Eighty-eight per cent of candidates rated the professionalism of the assessor and the rigour of the assessment process very highly (4 or 5). What was perhaps surprising in view of the high satisfaction ratings of the preparation days was the spread of ratings of preparedness for the final assessment event (average 2.9 out of 5). This could be indicative of a mismatch between preparation exercises and the final assessment process.

Issues and Concerns re: EYPS

Overall the pilot may be judged to have been a success. It ran relatively smoothly, there were no major problems or disasters, the majority of candidates were satisfied with the process and were deservedly successful in being awarded EYP Status. However, the pilot raised a number of concerns in relation to the process of validation and in relation to EYP Status.

Role of Needs Assessment

The 'needs assessment' process was extremely resource intensive (ratio of six staff to eight candidates for half a day) but had limited formative value since feedback came only four to six weeks before final assessment - too late for candidates to undertake any significant training to redress any identified skills deficits. This resource could be better used at the recruitment and selection stage when candidates are allocated to an appropriate training pathway depending on their qualifications, skills and experience.

Suitability of Assessment Methods

The design of the final assessment made no provision for observation of the candidates' practice. Instead corroboratory comments on the effectiveness of candidates' practice were solicited from witnesses. However, where a candidate is the owner/ manager of an early years setting and the witnesses are his/her staff, their independence must be questioned. Any assessment process for EYPS that does not include observation of candidates' practice - in particular the quality of their relationships and engagement with children - must be considered seriously flawed.

Bureaucracy

The requirement for verbatim recording of all interviews and observations, followed by transfer of extracts on to summary forms, may be an ideal way of producing an audit trail (promoting reliability) but it is not conducive to effective probing questioning. (Several candidates provided unsolicited comments that verbatim recording got in the way of effective personal interviews). It results in a degree of superficiality that reduces validity in relation to professional outcomes and is an inefficient use of highly qualified assessors. It is suggested that structured professional dialogue would be more effective with appropriately trained assessors making judgements directly against criteria. Audio or video recording could be used for purposes of moderation, external examination or in cases of dispute. Such assessment practices are commonplace in Higher Education and in professional body qualifications.

Over-ambitious Targets for EYPS

The UK Government target for an EYP in every day care setting by 2015 is ambitious given that currently the highest level of qualification for the majority (between fifty-two per cent and seventy-six per cent of staff according to Owen (2006) is level three and only five to six per cent have graduate (level six) qualifications (Abbott and Hevey, 2001). The paucity of staff with degrees in the PVI sector has been further substantiated during attempts to recruit candidates for this pilot. In other professional areas, graduate level qualifications have been introduced in stages over an extended time period. For example, in the UK the requirements for Nursing and Teaching progressed from a Certificate (level four) to a Diploma (level five) and eventually to a Degree (level six) qualification over a period of some twenty years.

EYPS versus QTS

The question of the status of Early Years Professionals relative to teachers has yet to be resolved. Government has not yet pronounced on whether teachers will continue to lead the curriculum in the new Early Years Foundation Stage, even though their training only covers the upper half of the age range, or whether they will be required to 'top-up' with birth to three training and gain EYPS as well. Neither has anything yet been said about the pay and conditions of EYPS holders relative to teachers. Without resolution of these issues many graduates are likely to pursue teacher training rather than EYPS.

Levels of Expectation

The EYPS standards require candidates not just to demonstrate their own effective practice but to demonstrate effectiveness in leading and supporting the practice of others through, for example, modelling, coaching, mentoring and acting as a change agent. This is a higher level than is expected of the majority of newly qualified professionals. Newly Qualified Teachers, for example, are supported throughout their first NQT year.

The Grandmother Principle

EYPS has been launched into a sector which is managed largely by highly experienced but poorly qualified practitioners. In many other areas the emergence of a new profession has been accompanied by fast-track routes to professional recognition for the most competent and experienced, regardless of formal qualifications. So for example, membership of the Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education can be achieved by established lecturers through a portfolio of evidence rather than through taking a prescribed course. An Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) system was introduced for the National Vocational Qualification Level 3 in Childcare and Education in order to fast-track those with appropriate knowledge and competence gained from experience. Some sort of similar system may be needed to avoid alienation of senior staff with outstanding records in day-care but for whom opportunities for relevant, graduate level education and training have previously been lacking.

Conclusion

The above analysis points to the absence of a coherent strategy for introducing EYPS and a failure to recognise the fundamental issues around professionalisation of a workforce. This is not entirely surprising given the timescales for EYPS implementation as dictated by the UK Government's political agenda. Overall it is suggested that:

- Needs assessment should be repositioned to provide formative feedback at a stage when it is most useful.
- The final assessment process should be based on a more professional, less bureaucratic model and should be given validity in the eyes of early years practitioners through incorporating observation of practice.
- The expectations of newly qualified EYPs should be comparable to those of other graduate professionals or the status re-badged as post-qualifying.
- While not in anyway wishing to lower rigour or standards in assessment, the 'grandmother principle' needs resolution.

The over-arching concern is that a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity to raise standards in early years will be lost. The best graduates will still go into teaching whilst existing experienced practitioners will become alienated rather than enthused about improving their practice.

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