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**Conference or Workshop Item**

**Title:** The Early Years Professional: holding a mirror up to policy makers

**Creators:** Lumsden, E.

**Example citation:** Lumsden, E. (2012) The Early Years Professional: holding a mirror up to policy makers. Seminar Presentation presented to: *2nd Global Conference, Childhood: A Persons Project, Mansfield College, Oxford, 07-09 July 2012.*

**Version:** Presented version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/4501/>



# **The Early Years Professional: Holding a Mirror up to Policy Makers**

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## **Abstract**

The importance of the early years for later life outcomes is increasingly being recognised. The former Labour Government (1997-2010) in England introduced a raft of policies aimed at raising the quality of early years provision and outcomes for the youngest children. As part of the changes a new graduate professional role and status, the Early Years Professional, was introduced evidencing a new era of involvement by policy makers in the professions. Government involvement in imposing and shaping the development makes the Early Years Professional vulnerable to political change; it was developed by government and could be removed. Indeed, political change in 2010 brought considerable uncertainty about whether the Coalition Government would continue to support the development, though they have now provided funding until 2015. Alongside this uncertainty, commissioned research evidence is emerging of the positive impact of the policy agenda of the former government. A situation that has not been formally recognised, rather it appears to have gone unnoticed by policy makers. Indeed, the current government have taken a range of actions to dismantle changes previously made and there is an emerging discourse reframing the early years as a period that supports the youngest children being ‘prepared’ for education. This paper aims to address the challenges of this change of emphasis by drawing upon doctoral research critiquing the concept, implementation and impact of Early Years Professional Status as a new professional model. The research design was underpinned by Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development and rather than being a linear development it has been impacted upon at every stage of development by instability in wider systems, therefore providing evidence that supports his under theorised ‘Chaotic System’ and that childhood is not only a development phase but one shaped by political ideology.

**Key Words: Early Years Professional, ECEC, early intervention, Bronfenbrenner, chaotic system, policy.**

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## **1. Introduction**

Prior to 1997, an integrated legislative and policy approach to meeting the educational and care needs of children and young people, in the English context, had been absent. Separatist rather than integrated models of service delivery prevailed. In the early years specifically, research findings have supported growing international recognition about the importance of good quality Early Childhood Education and Care, both economically and for later life achievements.

In England, the Labour Government (1997-2010) began to address the issues through a raft of policy initiatives. Their mantra as they introduced the *National Childcare Strategy*<sup>1</sup> was ‘Good quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0-14 in every neighbourhood.’<sup>2</sup> However, early years in England reflected a mixed economy of provision marked by variation in quality, poor qualification levels, pay and status. Consequently, achieving this in the early years was not going to happen without a clear policy strategy and acceptance that change takes time.

The low ‘status’ of the early years is arguably rooted in the relationship between ‘childcare’ and ‘mothering’ which permeates this area as ‘women’s work’ where ethics of care prevail.<sup>3</sup> This situation is influenced further by the way women and children are viewed in different cultures, societies and religions. It is also complicated by the fact that education and care in England have developed separately. It was not until 2006 that this distinction was formally addressed and the *Childcare Act 2006*<sup>4</sup> marked an important historical point in the evolution of early years provision by introducing the *Early Years Foundation Stage*<sup>5</sup> and the Early Years Professional, a new inter-disciplinary professional status and role imposed at graduate level. Underpinning this change was the formal acceptance that early educational opportunities could improve outcomes for the whole of the society.<sup>6</sup> However, this unprecedented step also took government involvement in the professions to a new dimension as it involved itself explicitly in orchestrating a new graduate level profession without the structure and benefits associated with traditional professions. It was presented as broadly equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status but not afforded the same pay and employment conditions. Neither was the development disseminated to other professionals in children’s services or parents/carers through a proactive marketing campaign.

It is this complex and multi-dimensional situation that underpins the central research aim: to explore the development of professional identity *through a critique of the concept, implementation and impact of Early Years Professional Status as a new professional role and status*. This paper specifically aims to address the challenges of government involvement in the professions by drawing upon the findings from this doctoral research in relation to wider policy and professional roles. It will argue that policy makers need to look ‘into the mirror’ and recognise the real impact of political ideology and the lived experiences of a workforce they have chosen to orchestrate. No other profession has been subjected to such government intervention on such a short timescale. The existing early years workforce is 98% women, many themselves from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. The extent to which they have embraced the opportunities that have been afforded to them, despite few material rewards, speaks volumes for their personal commitment to work with young children.

## **2. Policy Context**

The importance of the formal engagement by government in the early years sector from 1997 cannot be underestimated and the Early Years Professional was introduced into a complex policy arena of contradictions and incoherencies.<sup>7</sup> It was

part of a wider professionalisation process across the children's workforce. Furthermore, policy development is not divorced from economics and the development of EYPS was consistent with economic theories that emphasise educated citizens.<sup>8</sup> However, there are particular challenges of integrating education and care in a mixed economy of provision, with a varied Private, Voluntary and Independent sector that is not always characterised by making profit. For some settings, such as pre-schools, actually staying solvent is an issue.

Integrated services were a major area for policy development for the Labour Government (1997-2010) and with it a shift in departmental responsibility for early years to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), a move welcomed by many.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of their actions was to change the name to the Department of Children Schools and Families. The creation of a Minister for Children further enshrined the government's view of integration and symbolically that children and families were at the heart of the policy agenda. With the new British Coalition Government in May 2010 the capriciousness of policy direction was evidenced again as the name was immediately changed to the Department for Education (DfE), symbolically restoring the central place of education in the domestic policy hierarchy. However, it is important to remember that when policy is enshrined in legislation, change cannot occur quickly. The Coalition Government have to address the 'institutional arrangements'<sup>10</sup> of the former Labour Government whose policy strategy addressed wider economic issues by focusing on eradication of childhood poverty and integrated approaches to service delivery.

It is important to note that there is considerable diversity internationally about how children are reflected in the political agenda.<sup>11</sup> In the UK the voice of children, especially those in the early years, is often absent from policy development, rather they are the passive recipients of policy.<sup>121314</sup> This alongside different philosophical and political positioning to intervention in family life adds further challenges to policy development. Therefore, the introduction of EYPS is enmeshed in the challenges of policy making and the relationship between women, child rearing and the state. It is also located in the historical context of early years policy in Britain where the development of provisions for children and families was segregated rather than integrated.

Responsibility for wider children's services reform, including the Early Years Professional, was given to the *Children's Workforce Development Council* (CWDC). The intention was that there would be an Early Years Professional in every setting by 2010, though this was quickly changed to 2015 when it became apparent that there were insufficient people with the prerequisite qualifications. This target was compromised further with the change of government and the 'disappearance' from government directives about this deadline. A situation which fuelled uncertainty about whether the direction of travel on which the Labour Government had embarked would continue. However, the Coalition Government, that took office in May 2010, did confirm the continuation of EYPS in the medium term and the next phase of professional training pathways began in January 2012.<sup>15</sup>

The professionalisation of the early years sector was supported by a £250 million *Transformation Fund*<sup>16</sup> followed by a £305 million *Graduate Leaders Fund*.<sup>17</sup> This reflected a scale of financial commitment to the sector that had never been seen before. The aim was to develop the quality of provision for the youngest children, targeted primarily at the PVI sector.

The assessment process for the new graduate professional status (Level 6 in the National Qualifications Framework) was piloted from September to December 2006 however, before the pilot was completed the development was formalised and four different routes (Validation Pathway and the Short, Long or Full Training Pathways) to EYPS commenced in January 2007.<sup>18,19</sup> These were revised and January 2012 saw four new routes to EYPS delivered by eight lead providers<sup>20</sup>:

- *Graduate Practitioner Pathway* (six months part-time for experienced practitioners).
- *Undergraduate Practitioner Pathway* (12 months part-time for those with a Foundation Degree in Early Years or a degree and relevant work experience).
- *Undergraduate Entry Pathway* (Professional Pathway strand embedded in an Early Childhood Studies degree).
- *Graduate Entry Pathway*: (Full time for graduates with no or limited experience in the early years).

Initially candidates for EYPS had to meet thirty-nine national standards through a centrally specified assessment process (revised to eight from September 2012). The final assessment was originally an analysis of written tasks followed by a setting tour, interviews with witnesses and the candidate and scrutiny of a portfolio of supporting evidence.<sup>21</sup> In the first place secrecy rather than openness prevailed with candidates signing a declaration that they would not discuss the content of the gateway review with others. After the setting visit no indication could be given to the candidate about how they had performed until after a rigorous process of internal and external moderation. Consequently, candidates had to wait for several weeks for the outcome. The assessment processes were revised alongside the new delivery contracts in January 2012 to reflect transparency and greater autonomy.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework underpinning the research was based on the ecology of child and human development.<sup>22</sup> Whilst Bronfenbrenner was primarily concerned with children's development, for this research, the Bioecological Theory of Human Development was employed to support understanding of the development of a new integrated professional identity. The model was envisaged with the Early Years Professional in the centre. The focus was on the ecology of the collective and individual development of professional identity. To support a richer understanding of this development overtime, the impact of the *Chronosystem*, the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (PPCT)<sup>23</sup> was used.

#### 4. Methods

Mixed methods were employed to gather the collective and individual perceptions of those who undertook the pilot in 2006 and those who commenced one of the four pathways in 2007 with one training provider. Questionnaires (Table 1), interviews (22 Phase One and 23 Phase Two) and a focus group (Phase Two) were undertaken to gather insights at the start of the process, after the award of EYPS and a year later. The same methods were employed in two phases with stakeholders to add a further dimension to the research (Table 2). The research was underpinned by the British Educational Research Association Guidelines.<sup>24</sup> Research participants chose whether to complete questionnaires and participate in interviews. All identifiable characteristics were anonymised.

	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
	<i>Pathway Start</i>	<i>Start of Pathway Questionnaire (Baseline)</i>	<i>Candidates Undertaking Validation</i>	<i>End of Validation (Qu. One)</i>	<i>Awarded EYPS</i>	<i>One Year on Questionnaire (Qu. Two)</i>
<b>First Group</b>	46	-	41	30	39	5
<b>% Response Rate</b>		-		77% (of 39)		13% (of 39)
Main Sample	115	73	96	43	76	44
<b>% Response Rate</b>		63% (of 115)		45% (of 96)		58% (of 76)

*Table 1 Questionnaire Responses*

	Questionnaires	Interviews
Phase One Summer 2008	63 (63%)	10
Phase Two Summer 2009	46 (46%)	6

*Table 2 Stakeholders Questionnaire and Interview Responses*

## 5. Findings

The findings provided insights into the complicating factors that emerged from government involvement in orchestrating a profession. At a practice level four distinct responses emerged from the translation of government policy into practice:

1. Settings where the EYPS role had been fully embraced and affirmed by other practitioners.
2. Settings that were resistant to change but had been successfully challenged by the Early Years Professional to do so.
3. Settings where EYPS training had been undertaken because of government directives and financial support, rather than valuing what the new role could bring. The Early Years Professional was in name only to meet the former target for a graduate in every setting.
4. Settings that appeared totally resistant to changing practice and renegotiating roles and responsibilities.

It is important to note that in recent years the government has become more involved in controlling aspects of traditional professions.<sup>2526</sup> The difference for the Early Years Professional is that it does not have an established evolutionary history to draw on or a professional body to support its members. Also, there is not a large critical mass that is sufficiently established in the workforce to ensure government hears their voice. Those participating in this research believed that pay scales and status should be on par with teachers. However, the financial support that was provided through the *Graduate Leaders Fund*,<sup>27</sup> was not always fully understood and the research findings suggested not always used in the way it was intended.

Concerns were expressed about the susceptibility of EYPS to government change. This happened just after the data gathering phase, bringing with it ambiguous messages from the DfE and uncertainty about the future. There were economic challenges at a national level and further devolution of financial responsibility to local authorities to address local need. Additionally, it was announced that the CWDC was to be abolished and areas of work covered to be brought under the control of the DfE, through a new Teaching Agency. Whilst claiming a commitment to the next phase of development the incoming Coalition Government removed the requirement for children's centres to have both an Early Years Teacher and an Early Years Professional and abolished the 2015 target for an Early Years Professional in every setting.<sup>28</sup> So those settings who had resisted engaging in workforce development seemed ratified in their decision.

These policy changes appear to have been made without reference to evaluation research and seem to contradict outcomes of government sponsored reviews into the importance of the foundation years for long term outcomes and early intervention.<sup>2930</sup> Additionally, the review of the EYFS<sup>31</sup> stressed the importance of graduate leadership and findings from the *First National Survey of Practitioners with EYPS*<sup>32</sup> and the *Evaluation of the Graduate Leaders Fund*<sup>33</sup> supported the

development of EYPS, the latter providing clear evidence of children's outcomes improving, findings supported by this research. Even in settings where a clear role had not been negotiated improved quality was reported when an Early Years Professional was involved, the desired impact of the policy direction of a graduate led workforce.

## 6. Reflections on the Theoretical Framework

The Bioecological Theory of Human Development<sup>34</sup> supported understanding about how events in each of the *systems* have influenced each other and reinforces the importance of the *Chronosystem* in developing understanding of the evolution of this new professional role and status. However, the development has been impacted upon by wider international and national developments which have led to financial cutbacks in England and a change of government. As the training for this role was cascaded out in 2007, it took place in an economic and political climate of uncertainty following the failure of a number of financial institutions in USA which has had repercussions worldwide. Furthermore, the change in the UK Government in May 2010 and the subsequent austerity measures have impacted on the development and implementation of EYPS. Rather than the early years being the focus of growth in terms of government spending, this area alongside youth services 'is expected to be cut by over 20% in real terms in total,'<sup>35</sup> in order to protect schools.

This situation provides new insights into the relatively under theorised '*Chaotic System*'. This system emerged from Bronfenbrenner's increasing concern about societal issues and the impact of chaos in the lives of children, young people and families.<sup>36</sup> The new challenge being to develop a research framework to support understanding of the changes in societal development and breakdown, the impact of chaos in people's lives and what might be done to reverse the situation.

It can be argued that the Early Years Professional grew out of the need to ensure that the youngest and most disadvantaged children received high quality ECEC to improve their long term outcomes. Furthermore, the development has been impacted upon by wider societal factors unknown at its inception. Rather than being a linear development EYPS has arguably been impacted upon at every stage of development by instability in wider systems and therefore the simplification inherent in the theoretical model inevitably failed to capture this 'chaos' that surrounded its inception. The concept of a *Chaotic System* therefore offers the opportunity to understand the destabilising influence of wider political and societal issues on the development of a new professional identity. Rather than the concentric circles being ordered and the development of EYPS being linear the development has been somewhat more 'chaotic'.

Potentially therefore, a new dimension exists that can be added to the PPCT Model, namely 'chaos'. Here the relationship between each of the elements can be destabilised by wider events, the '*Chaotic System*'. If we consider the overarching aim of this research, the PPCCT framework supports understanding of how the processes, the Early Years Professional and the context of the development have



been impacted upon by time and wider political and societal events (*Chaotic System*) over the research period.

## 6. Conclusion

The initial investment made by the Labour Government is beginning to make a positive difference despite not addressing key issues of professional pay and conditions. The incoming Coalition Government have confirmed continuation of EYPS up to 2015 but introduced ‘chaos’ into the system by removing the requirements for settings to employ an Early Years Professional by that date. They also claim to have recognised the importance of early intervention, yet have failed to acknowledge that those with EYPS have an important role in this agenda, for all children. Strengthened by evidence from recent national evaluations the Coalition Government now needs to send a clear message to the *Microsystem* around Early Years Professionals that Early Years Professionals are not just desirable but essential members of the wider children’s workforce and central to achieving policy objectives associated with breaking the cycle of deprivation. However, policy makers need to ‘look into the mirror’ and ask themselves why *they* are not recognising the new professional in real terms and why *they* are allowing social injustice, poverty and low status in the early years workforce to persist.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Number 10, gov.uk, *National Childcare Strategy*, (London: Number 10, 2003), Viewed 8<sup>th</sup> March 2010, <<http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page1430>[Accessed]>
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School: A Democratic Alternative*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 61-63.
- <sup>4</sup> Department for Education and Skills, *Childcare Act 2006*, (London: The Stationary Office, 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> Department for Education and Skills. *Early Years Foundation Stage*, (Nottingham: DfES publications, 2007).

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- <sup>14</sup> Priscilla Alderson, *Young Children’s Rights: Exploring Beliefs, Principles and Practice*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 78-110.
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<sup>17</sup> Department of Children Schools and Families. *The Graduate Leader Fund* (London: DCSF, 2008). Viewed 24<sup>th</sup> June 2011, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100113205508/dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/strategy/delivering-services/workforcereform/earlyyearsworkforce/earlyyearsworkforce/>

<sup>18</sup> Children's Workforce Development Council. *Early Years Professional Prospectus*, (Leeds: CWDC, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Denise Hevey, 'Developing a New Profession: A Case Study' *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal*. **1** (2010), 233-242. Viewed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2011, < [http://infonomics-society.org/LICEJ/Developing%20a%20New%20Profession\\_A%20Case%20Study.pdf](http://infonomics-society.org/LICEJ/Developing%20a%20New%20Profession_A%20Case%20Study.pdf) >

<sup>20</sup> Department for Education (2012) *Early Years Professional Status* (London: DfE, 2012). Viewed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2012, <<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/delivery/a00201435/eyps-faq>>

<sup>21</sup> Children's Workforce Development Council, *Early Years Professional Prospectus*

<sup>22</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*, (London: Sage Publications Limited, 2005), 3-21.

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<sup>28</sup> Department for Education. Government Moves to free up Children's Centres, (London: DfE, 2010), Viewed 24th October 2011. <<http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0067775/government-moves-to-free-up-childrens-centres>>

<sup>29</sup> Frank Field, *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances*. London: Cabinet Office, 2010), 27-36.

<sup>30</sup> George Allen, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps: An Independent Report to her Majesty's Government*. London: Cabinet Office, 2011), 3-12.

<sup>31</sup> Clare Tickell, *The Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage*, (London: DfE, 2011), Viewed 10th August 2011. <<http://www.education.gov.uk/tickellreview>>

<sup>32</sup> Mark Hadfield, Micheal Jopling, Karl Royle and Tim Waller, *First National Survey of Practitioners with Early Years Professional Status*, (Leeds: CWDC, 2010). Viewed 5th January 2011 <[http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/1377/First National Survey of Practitioners with EYPS.pdf](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/1377/First_National_Survey_of_Practitioners_with_EYPS.pdf)>

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<sup>34</sup> Bronfenbrenner, *Making Human Beings Human*.

<sup>35</sup> Haroon Chowdry and Luke Sibieta, *Trends in Education and School Spending*. IFS Briefing Note BN121(2011), Viewed on 11th November, 2011, <<http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn121.pdf> >

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