

Early years professionals deserve more recognition ^[1]

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Sep 2012

EXCERPTS:

Last month, the number of people qualifying with Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) reached the 10,000 milestone. The 10,000th graduate, Nafeesah Rafiq, was hailed by Sarah Teather, the Minister for Children and Families, as being one of the "talented and passionate" professionals now working in our nurseries and pre-school facilities who have the potential to "make a particular impact on those who are among the most disadvantaged".

The Minister is absolutely right. Such highly trained and knowledgeable professionals working in the early years sector are making an enormous contribution to the life chances of thousands of young children from all backgrounds.

On the face of it, this vital workforce has come a long way from the days of the 'mum's army' of women who would work in pre-school settings, often as volunteers, and always unnoticed in challenging conditions. Yet the many graduates now working in early years facilities remain unrecognised, despite having completed a multi-disciplinary degree. The Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey (DLHA) does not classify early years work as a graduate job at all, because it contains no managerial classification to define it as such, though many of those achieving EYPS will be graduates who end up in leadership roles.

In fact it was the introduction of the EYPS that brought about the move towards a professionalised service. The now defunct Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) set a goal that by 2010 every early years private, voluntary and independent facility would have at least one employee with EYPS who would lead good practice among their colleagues, and that they would enjoy parity as professionals with teachers who have achieved Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

While a workforce of 10,000 staff trained to postgraduate-level is a step in the right direction, the aims of the CWDC sadly remains some way off being achieved. Ministers may celebrate this milestone, but there are outstanding issues that the government needs to address.

Firstly, no-one has been brave enough to tackle the pay and conditions of service for staff working in foundation years, and therefore the tens of thousands of staff working there remain relatively poorly paid. Unlike their counterparts in school classrooms, early years staff are under-represented by trade unions and associations and have never had the benefit of a professional body to act as their advocate.

Furthermore, the EYPS has recently been undermined by an independent review into the early years qualifications framework carried out on behalf of the government by Professor Cathy Nutbrown, of the University of Sheffield. Her interim findings attracted criticism from pre-school staff when she suggested that EYPS should be phased out and effectively absorbed by QTS. The implication was that, contrary to previous assurances, there was no parity between the two professional qualifications.

What is now needed is a shift in attitude and understanding on the impact the work of early years professionals has on the development of young children. Numerous reports have concluded that getting the early years right and putting in place the appropriate interventions where needed is crucial to a child's future academic and social success. Yet the very people to whom we give this huge responsibility are still not being adequately rewarded or recognised for the work that they do in terms of their professional status, pay or conditions of service.

One of the big questions is who is going to pay the additional wages to employ this level of expertise on a larger scale? Putting up childcare fees would defeat the object and put early years provision out of the reach of many families, and at a time when parents are already struggling to afford the fees. It needs a strong government to take a lead and to ensure that the remuneration reflects the importance of the job.

Perhaps the first step should be recognising the professional status of early years graduates. At the University of Worcester - one of only eight national providers of the EYPS programme - 97% of our early childhood graduates gain employment within six months of leaving us. Yet this is not reflected in our position in any media-created university 'league tables' because of the DLHA's classifications.

There needs now to be an acknowledgement of the rigour of the EYPS programme that these students undertake, which includes the study of aspects such as the law around children and families, expertise in the birth to five age range, safeguarding children, leading delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage, child development and psychology, and health and welfare.

This level of expertise must be viewed more favourably than is currently the case. Early childhood professionals are educators, carers, family support workers, and so much more - taking on multi-faceted roles requiring a full understanding of the holistic needs of children and their families. They must be valued for their knowledge as well as the responsibility entrusted in them by parents and society in

general.

-reprinted from the Guardian

Region: Europe ^[2]

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