

Professional identity in early childhood care and education: perspectives of pre-school and infant teachers

This paper explores perceptions of professional identity in the early childhood care and education sector (ECCE) in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). It is concerned with the status, salary and conditions of those working with children aged four to six in pre-school and primary school settings. Using qualitative methodology, the study garnered personal perspectives and insights into professional identity. It presents new empirical evidence on the attitudes of those working in ECCE towards their professional identity and their aspirations for the future. Findings indicate that professional identity is contentious and problematic. At pre-school level, this is predominantly associated with the lack of a mandatory training requirement. There is compelling evidence that highly trained ECCE graduates are being lost to the sector. At primary school level, while teachers per se enjoy a relatively high social status, their professional identity as infant teachers is compromised within individual school settings. Teachers believe that this is related to a perception that the infant class is akin to 'playschool'. As a result, they do not get the same respect as teachers working in classes higher up the school. These issues give rise to fundamental questions about the value of early childhood as well as the value placed on those working with four- to six-year-old children in pre-school and primary school.

Keywords: professional identity; qualifications; working conditions; infant teachers

Introduction

Currently, in the ROI, ECCE provision is highly stratified. It comprises a mix of publicly funded community-based and privately owned and managed settings. The sector has experienced a labyrinth of change throughout the past decade. A range of initiatives directed at improving the quality of provision and increasing the professionalism of the sector have been developed. As a consequence, much more is expected of the ECCE workforce than heretofore. Their professional role is more complex and they are subject to significant accountability pressures from external agencies. In spite of these competing demands there is no statutory requirement to have a qualification; a basic tenet of professional practice and identity.

In exploring professional identity, I contend that to focus solely on those working in the pre-school sector portrays an incomplete picture. This assertion is aligned to international definitions of early childhood, which generally locate the field as being concerned with the care and education of children between birth and six years. While the school starting age in the ROI is six, half of all four-year-olds and nearly all five-year-olds attend primary school (Department of Education and Science [DES] 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2004, 2006). Consequently, the DES (2004) claim that much of what is considered pre-school education in other countries, from age four to six years, is provided through junior and senior infant classes in primary school. In addition, two practice frameworks: the National Quality Framework: Síolta (2006) and the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: Aistear (2009) traverse pre-school and infant classes in primary school. Thus, infant teachers become appropriate foci in exploring concepts of professional identity in the early years' sector.

The ECCE workforce represents a diverse group that differs considerably in their initial preparation, qualifications, employment situations and status. A typology includes a mix of graduate and postgraduate qualified teachers who may or may not have specialist training in working with young children (OECD 2001, 2006; Bennett and Neuman 2004; National Economic and Social Forum [NESF] 2005; DES 2007, 2009). In fact, it is estimated that 30% of staff are without any education in the field (OECD 2006; DES 2007). Osgood and Stone (2002) argue that such diversity in provision encourages staff to behave in isolated and defensive ways. As a result, they lack a unified identity or a shared belief in themselves as a professional group (Osgood and Stone 2002).

The ECCE sector is primarily associated with women who love and care for children ‘far from the towers of academia’ (Lobman and Ryan 2007; Carter and Doyle 2006, 373). Such perspectives are rooted within two major discourses. The first, associated with a traditional view of women, sees childcare as the specific remit of women in the home, while responsibility for children’s education rests with the DES. On the other hand, ECCE is a low status, poorly paid sector, predominantly characterised by women with limited training. This situation is particularly true of the ROI, where it is perpetuated by the limitations of the Childcare (Pre-Schools Services) Regulations, 2006. These regulations simply require ‘a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults working directly with the children in the pre-school setting at all times’ (Department of Health and Children [DHC] 2006, 37).

Notwithstanding the lacuna in the childcare regulations, the ROI, in common with the UK, New Zealand and elsewhere, has developed policies that have helped to focus attention on the ‘Early Years Professional’, and, consequently, on the professional identity of the ECCE sector. Thus, as ECCE provision becomes increasingly prominent on social and political agendas, so too does the central role of the workforce.

Internationally, the OECD (2001, 11) acknowledge the ‘growing educational and social responsibilities’ of those working in ECCE. Quality ECCE, therefore, is dependent upon ‘strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector’. Crucially, the OECD highlight the need to ensure that a career in ECCE is ‘satisfying, respected and financially viable’ (11). Likewise, Forde et al. (2006) refer to affective components of professional identity such as self-esteem, self-belief, professional self-confidence, job satisfaction and motivation. They posit that professional identity is a highly personalised construct that rests in part on our feelings and attitudes about the job we do. Mindful of these components, this paper explores the following aspects of professional identity; the extent to which ECCE staff, graduates, infant teachers and students believe they have a professional identity, their opinions on how their identity is perceived by others, factors that influence professional identity, attitudes towards terms and conditions of employment and perceptions of each other’s professional identity.

The Irish ECCE context

Historically, while seven government departments have had responsibility for various aspects of ECCE policy, major responsibility rested with two ministries: the DHC and the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). Following repeated calls for a lead government department, the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) was established in 2005 to maximise coordination of policies for children and young people. Responsibility for ECCE passed to the OMC, to which a Minister for Children was appointed. An Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) was established within the DES which is co-located

within the OMC. The purpose of this unit is to oversee the development of policies and provision for early years education within an overall strategic policy framework. Essentially, the DES has established a separate policy unit for early childhood, staffed by a single professional. ECCE services are regulated through the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006, which are enforced by the HSE.

Since 1999, the ROI has focused on developing a comprehensive ECCE infrastructure. In this respect, two successive investment programmes were implemented between 2000 and 2010, the central thrust of which was to increase the number of available childcare places. In addition, numerous policy initiatives directed towards influencing the quality and professionalism of the sector were developed. These include the White Paper on Early Childhood Education: Ready to learn (DES 1999); The National Children's Strategy: Our children their lives (DHC 2000); the National Quality Framework: Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] 2006); and the Early Childhood curriculum Framework: Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2009). It follows that professional identity is shaped by the multitude of policies that underpin professional practice, giving rise to altering expectations of ECCE staff.

As the sector is increasingly caught in the regulatory gaze, there is every right to expect high standards of care, matched by equally high levels of training and professional practice; basic factors that contribute to a professional workforce, with a clearly defined professional identity. Unfortunately, while the policies outlined stand as testimony to the development of an ECCE infrastructure, they are remiss in terms of delineating a professional identity for the sector. This is most notable in terms of the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006, which, as the only statutory policy governing ECCE provision, is marked by the absence of a mandatory training requirement. While ECCE personnel are not required to have a qualification, there is an expectation that 50% hold an appropriate qualification.

As yet, no agreement has been reached on what constitutes an appropriate qualification. It is important to note, however, that significant progress has been achieved in terms of delineating occupational profiles for the sector through the publication of A model framework for education, training and professional development (DJELR 2002). The roles vary from that of basic practitioner to expert practitioner. Following recent mapping and cross-referencing exercises, the DES (2009) maintain that the Model Framework is still relevant to the future development of education and training programmes so as to ensure an appropriately skilled and qualified ECCE workforce into the future.

Worthy of note also is the launch of the National Framework of Qualifications in 2003. This is a system of 10 levels encompassing the widest possible spread of learning. These range from Level 1 awards that recognise the ability to perform basic tasks, to Level 10 awards that recognise the ability to discover and develop new knowledge and skills at the frontier of research and scholarship (Figure 1).

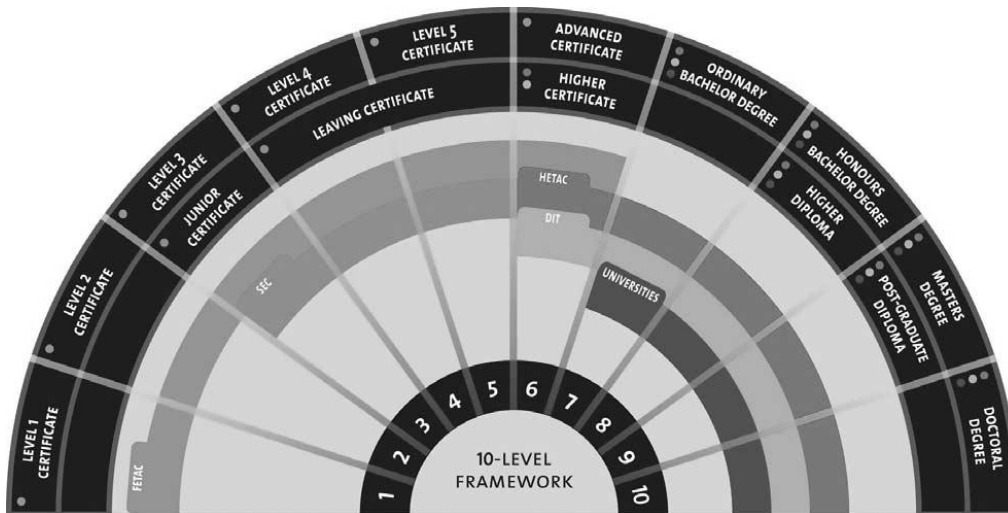


Figure 1. National qualifications framework. #2003, NQAI. Reproduced with kind permission.

According to the DES (2009), the development of occupational profiles, associated national awards and alignment with international awards are important prerequisites for the development of clear professional pathways within ECCE.

Professional identity in the early years sector

ECCE personnel have had a historic struggle for recognition of their professionalism (Helterbran and Fennimore 2004; Lobman and Ryan 2007). This struggle has been sustained by a traditional bifurcation of care and education. While the sector is perceived as caring, maternal and strongly gendered (Moss 2000), there is an emerging consensus on the direct link between staff training, qualifications and ongoing professional development in the provision of ECCE (Moyles, Adams, and Musgrove 2002; Saracho and Spodek 2003; Hayes 2007; OECD 2001, 2006; Vandell 2004; Dalli 2008). Equally, there is agreement on the need to develop a coherent, recognisable body of professional practice (DJEL 2002; Saracho et al. 2003; CECDE 2006; NCCA 2004; Urban 2008).

Tucker (2004, 88) provides a framework for analysis that helps to identify a range of factors associated with the construction of professional identity (Figure 2).

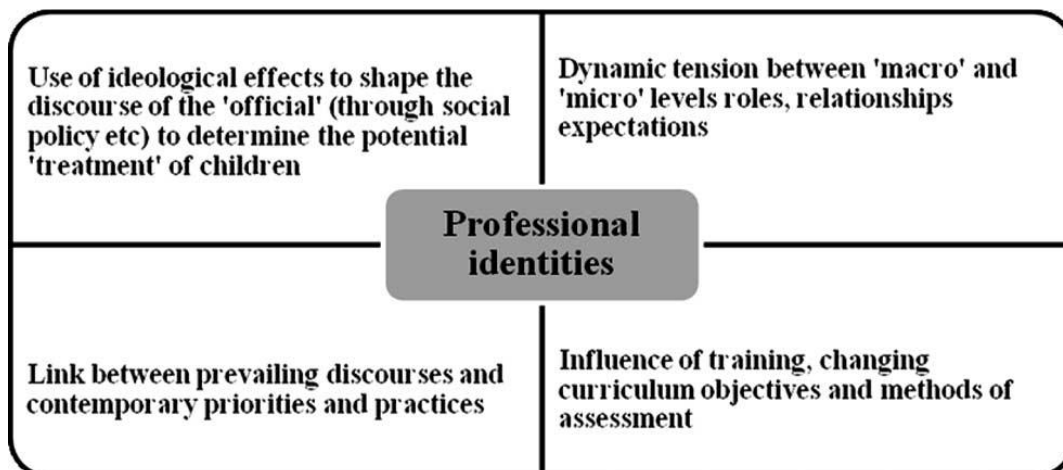


Figure 2. Factors associated with the construction of professional identity.

Within this model, professional identity is located at the confluence of historical, social, economic and political trajectories, central to which is investment in training, development and support mechanisms. Professional identity, therefore, is enmeshed in a broader societal discourse that is underpinned by values, personal qualities, ideology, relationships, status, training and qualifications (Tucker 2004; Dalli 2008; Urban 2008). Consequently, it can be argued that it results from connections made and interactions between societal and personal philosophies as well as professional training and practice. While Tucker (2004) notes that experiences have the power to alter the way we think communicate and act, this can only happen in the context of good experiences through which professional practice is observed, enacted and re-enacted. Furthermore, it is critical that professional practice is supported through a combination of comprehensive pre-service training and ongoing professional development. This approach is central to the development, understanding, sharing and implementation of common core principles that, ultimately, are at the heart of professional identity.

Primary school teacher professional identity

Teacher professional identity is underpinned by mandatory training, typified by a strongly developed model of initial teacher preparation. On successful completion, students are awarded a B.Ed. degree qualifying them to teach in primary school. The teacher's principal role is to implement the primary school curriculum, which is synonymous with professional identity. Teachers have defined roles and responsibilities, terms and conditions of employment and remuneration as determined by the DES, under whose auspices they are employed and to whom they are accountable.

Both the role and knowledge base of the teacher is clearly defined. Accordingly, the OECD (2005, 26) define a teacher as a person whose:

Professional activity involves the transmission of knowledge, attitude and skills that are stipulated to students enrolled in an educational programme. . . . [it] does not include non-professional personnel who support teachers in providing instruction to students, such as teacher's aides or other paraprofessional personnel.

This definition, clearly limited to the primary school sector, excludes a whole cohort of ECCE personnel working with children outside the domain of formal education, irrespective of their levels of training. It gives credence to the OECD (2006, 158) observation that 'early childhood educators working closest to the school gate are better rewarded', thus highlighting the dichotomy between pre-school and primary school.

Crucially, teachers have opportunities for career advancement. In Australia, for example, they have access to a career structure ranging from beginning teacher to experienced teacher, to experienced teacher with responsibility, or learning area or grade level coordinator, assistant principal, principal and regional office positions. Each stage is accompanied by an annual salary increment. In the ROI, teachers can access four categories of promotion; principal, deputy principal; assistant principal and special duties teacher (OECD 2005). A teaching council of Ireland, to which all teachers must register, was legally established in March 2006. As a statutory body, the council regulates the professional practices of teachers, oversees teacher education programmes and enhances their professional development. Accordingly, the council provides teachers with a large degree of professional autonomy, helping to enhance their professional status and morale. It is clear that teachers fit within the established

social order, are seen as valuable contributors to society and are important, indeed critical, to children's education and development. Their value and professional status therefore, is underpinned by the systems that have been put in place to support them.

In considering teacher professional identity, one thinks of the DES, the NCCA or the Irish National Teacher's Organisation (INTO), all terms associated with the teaching profession and teacher identity (just as the medical profession, for instance, is linked to the Irish Medical Association (IMO), the Hippocratic Oath and so on). According to Saracho et al. (2003) the learned professions _ medicine, law and clergy _ were traditionally conceived as occupations that demanded a high degree of preparation in liberal arts or science. 'Lower level' professions _ teaching, nursing or social work, referred to as 'semi-professions' _ require less preparation and their status is considered to be at a lower level (Saracho 2003, 213).

Regardless of how we view these respective professions or semi-professions, the point is that they are marked by a professional identity that is instantly recognisable and linked to the practices, ethics, codes and core values by which they are defined.

Pre-school staff professional identity

Conversely, professional identity within ECCE is obscure. It is closely aligned to concepts of quality, a dynamic construct that is fraught with contradictions and challenges as reflected in four primary discourses: (1) nomenclature; (2) diverse workforce; (3) low status; and (4) absence of a mandatory training requirement. It is incomprehensible that in twenty-first century Ireland there is still no mandatory training requirement for this sector.

Mirroring closely the views expressed by others (OECD 2001, 2006; Saracho et al. 2003) Mahony and Hayes (2006, 154) argue that ECCE is predominantly characterised by a lack of professionalism, low salaries, lack of training and poor working conditions. These factors considerably undermine the professional identity of the sector which is influenced by 'the perceptions they have developed of themselves in relation to their societal value and their importance to young children and families' (Tucker 2004; Day et al. 2006; Flores and Day 2006; Swick 1985, 73).

The low status of ECCE is located within a feminist paradigm, where the traditional construct is that of physical care undertaken by women without training (Jalongo et al. 2004; OECD 2006; Lobman et al. 2007). Indeed, Jalongo et al. (2004, 146) suggest that the care of young children has been treated as a 'natural outgrowth of maternal instincts, a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material'. Such statements are unhelpful. They not only lose sight of significant progress throughout the last decade as manifest through the progressive policy initiatives as outlined; they further alienate the ECCE workforce and conjure connotations of simplicity. As a result, they weaken and undermine the professional identity of the sector, serving to cloud the valuable relational aspects of this unique and highly specialised branch of social care.

Discourses on ECCE

Professional demarcation within ECCE is ambiguous. In an attempt to understand the concept of professionalism in the Scottish ECCE sector, Adams (2005) identified at least 11 job titles. Commenting on these findings, Urban (2008, 139) notes that they reflect a broader picture that is identifiable in individual countries as well as within international discourse. David

(2003) agrees that the occupational names applied to the sector are not informative, particularly with regard to the initial training and qualifications of staff.

According to Early and Winton (2001), policy-makers and the public are often shocked when confronted with statistics on the education and compensation of the ECCE workforce. They highlight the wide discrepancy between what research says about the important role of early educators and the set of existing policies and practices that do 'not support an adequately compensated professional workforce' (Early and Winton 2001, 286). The low status of the sector features prominently in early years discourse. For example, the OECD (2006) stress that the profiling of lead professional staff is often blurred, with public split systems commonly characterised by the hiring of unskilled and low paid women. Far from delineating the complexity, breadth and depth of the roles and responsibilities involved, current terminology which oscillates between care and education, coupled with split systems, obscures the professional identity of those working with young children outside the primary education sector.

In Scandinavian countries, ECCE services are considered to 'constitute a unified socio-education system for children from birth to six . . . and a social support system for their families' (Bennett and Neuman 2004, 430). This explains the existence of a body of educators with a 'strong, unique identity'. The unity and comprehensiveness of this approach lies in stark contrast to the ambiguity of ECCE elsewhere in Europe, as underpinned by the following questions, posed by the OECD regarding the purposes of ECCE. How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff?

Dalli (2008) tracks development in New Zealand, whereby the term teacher, previously reserved for those working in state kindergartens, is now applied to all qualified early childhood staff employed in licensed early childhood centres. Significantly, early childhood is now perceived as a teacher-led profession. In spite of policy rhetoric in the ROI, that purports to enhance professional practice, the sector continues to be characterised by its low status, absence of a unified professional identity, fragmentation, the absence of either a mandatory curriculum or training requirement and limited progression routes (OECD 2001, 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 2006; Mahony and Hayes 2006; Hayes 2007; Bennett 2007; Urban 2006; Moloney in press).

Transitions in teacher's roles and identity

The OECD (2006) claim that the social standing of teachers has remained relatively unchanged over the years and is still quite high. However, they express concern that, overall, teacher status is being diminished. Teacher issues increasingly appear on policy agendas as their role and status undergo considerable change (Sachs 2001, 2003; OECD 2006; Woods and Jeffrey 2002). The demands on teachers are becoming more complex. Such demands are interwoven with the concept of accountability, resulting from public awareness and the needs and rights of parents as consumers, together with the demands of policy-makers. In general, parents are more highly educated and articulate than ever before, with greater expectations for their children's education. These factors preclude the closed world of school, where, traditionally, the teacher's word was unchallenged. Consequently, the concept of accountability is increasingly at the forefront of discussion and debate concerning teacher practice.

This discourse has been fuelled by the publication of inspector's reports on schools, discussion of league tables, and early school leaving. Indeed, Woods and Jeffrey (2002) suggest that teachers have seen their role reduced to a list of competencies and performativities. Thus, as they endeavour to become more responsive to external demands and judgements, teacher's professional identity is less clearly defined.

Sachs (2001, 153) holds that teacher professional identity is shaped by two 'competing discourses', managerial and democratic. Managerial, enforced by authority, emphasises accountability and effectiveness. It shapes professional practice and identity in terms of compliance with these elements. On the other hand, democratic discourse emphasises collaboration and 'cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders' (2001, 153). She argues that teacher professional identities are 'rich and complex because they are produced in rich and complex sets of relations of practice' (2001, 160). She further stresses the need to nurture this richness and complexity in 'conditions where there is respect, mutuality and communication' (2001, 160).

According to Sachs (2001, 2003), belonging to a community of practice is instrumental in shaping professional identity. Consequently, being accepted by peers, feeling that you belong and are valued within the workplace are significant, affective aspects of professional identity. As noted by Sachs (2003, 133), communities of practice can have 'a profound impact on teacher's lives both in terms of their classroom practice and in terms of how they construct their professional identities'.

Ball (2003) posits that teaching is increasingly concerned with outcomes and maximising performance. Teachers, therefore, are continually reviewing their professional role and may be forced to assume multiple identities to meet competing demands and expectations which can lead to a sense of volatility and uncertainty (Woods and Jeffrey 2002).

Research design and methodology

In order to garner personal perspectives and insights into professional identity, this study uses a qualitative methodology. Thus, individual interviews were undertaken with 56 research participants. In this way, data was generated that enabled 'authentic insight into people's experiences' to be garnered (Silverman 2001, 87) by capturing direct quotations about personal perspectives and experiences (Patton 2002). By its nature, qualitative research deals with data in the form of words, rather than statistics and numbers, and on developing an interpretation of data that explores the meaning for participants of the phenomenon being studied. The rationale for employing a qualitative methodology for this study, therefore, was to elicit information from participants about their attitudes, feelings, opinions and perceptions of professional identity. While the broad categories outlined were developed to guide the interview process, the flexibility of the interviews provided opportunities to further probe expand and clarify participant responses.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. They were chosen because they were 'information rich', offering useful information and insights to the phenomenon of interest (Patton 2002, 46). Specifically, a typical case-sampling strategy was utilised. In accordance with the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006, ECCE settings caring for three or more children are required to notify the Health Services Executive (HSE) that they are operating a pre-school service. Thus, the sampling frame used consisted of HSE

notified listings of ECCE settings within a particular geographic location. Likewise, primary schools were selected from DES records available for the same location.

A letter detailing the nature of the research, an invitation to participate, together with the research ethical framework, was issued to 20 ECCE and 20 primary school settings. Ten ECCE settings agreed to participate. Thus, 10 ECCE managers and 16 childcare staff participated in the study. Five primary schools agreed to participate. Due to the number of schools with multiple infant classes, a total of 10 infant teachers participated. These participants represented variations in gender, socioeconomic status of settings, and variation in pre-service qualifications. At the request of participants, interviews were conducted in either the pre-school or primary school setting.

The views of 10 Bachelor of Arts (BA) ECCE graduates and 10 final year bachelor of education (B.Ed) students were also garnered. These participants were selected by targeting a class of final year BA ECCE and B.Ed students attending a university in the same geographic location as the pre-school and infant teachers. Consequently, 10 BA ECCE and 10 B.Ed students participated. The overall sample provided a broad overview of how those working or preparing to work with children in pre-school and primary school view their respective professional identity. Each interview, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, was digitally recorded and transcribed. Analytical notes were written on completion of each interview. This process served as a form of 'quality control' helping to ensure that the data gathered was useful, reliable and authentic Patton (2002, 384).

Data was analysed through content analysis. Initially, the volume of data was reduced into manageable units. Using an iterative process each transcript was read line by line and divided into meaningful units. Through direct examination of the data, inductive codes relating to specific themes were applied to each unit. More than one code was applied to some data units. Analytical notes written about the interviews before transcription were used to inform this process, which continued until all data was segmented and initial coding completed. Following initial coding, segments were continuously reread. In this way, codes were refined and revised until no further themes emerged. Finally, data was thematically organised, summarised and enumerated to determine levels of agreement among participants, frequency of themes and any discrepant examples.

Findings

The research findings are presented through the following themes; qualification levels of ECCE managers and staff; diverse terminology; perceptions of professional identity; factors that shape professional identity; attitudes towards terms and conditions of employment; perceptions of each other's professional identity; aspirations for the future.

Qualification levels of ECCE managers and staff

With the exception of one ECCE manager, with a third-level degree in a discipline unrelated to ECCE, all other participants held a specific qualification in working with children from birth to six years. These qualifications were attained through fulltime attendance at colleges of further education ranging from one to two years duration.

Table 1. Overview of ECCE managers and staff qualifications

Manager	FETAC Level 5	FETAC Level 6	Montessori teaching diploma	3 rd level degree (unrelated discipline)	Number of years experience
1	√				30
2	√				17
3			√		10
4		√			8
5	√				3
6				√	5
7			√		6
8	√				10
9	√				8
10	√				4
ECCE Staff					
1	√				
2	√				
3			√		
4			√		
5			√		
6	√				
7	√				
8			√		
9			√		
10	√				
11	√				
12			√		
13			√		
14	√				
15	√				
16	√				

As Table 1 illustrates, research participants held a diverse range of qualifications. 60% of ECCE managers held a FETAC Level 5 qualification, 10% FETAC Level 6 and 20% held a Montessori teaching diploma with a further 10% having a degree in an unrelated discipline. Findings also indicate that 60% of ECCE managers held the same basic qualification (FETAC Level 5) as their staff members. In terms of ECCE staff, 56.25% were trained to FETAC Level 5, while the remaining 43.75% held a Montessori teaching diploma.

Diverse terminology

To me your professional identity is almost as important as your personal identity; I mean you spend how long every day working? You should have some sort of pride in what you do. But here in Ireland, we don't even have a name for what we do.

This is the opinion of a graduate who spent four years undertaking an ECCE degree. Her sentiments are compounded by the diverse terminology used by ECCE managers and staff to describe their work. These terms indicate the level of uncertainty, ambiguity and change that permeates the sector. One interviewee described herself as being 'a bit of everything really'; mirroring this perspective another said 'I don't know; I just work with children'.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the terms used by childcare staff to describe their role.

Figure 3 Overview of terminology used to describe the ECCE worker

Terminology

Practitioner, nursery assistant, childcare assistant, childcare worker, early years worker, crèche worker, crèche assistant, educator, key worker, childcare staff, pre-school assistant, pre-school tutor, pre-school worker, pre-school leader, nursery worker, playgroup worker, playgroup leader, Montessori teacher and Montessori assistant

In total, 20 different terms were used, of which the most frequently used term was ‘practitioner’. While three interviewees identified themselves as ‘teachers’, there was general agreement that those working within ECCE ‘are definitely not teachers’.

Perceptions of professional identity

Irrespective of their training, findings indicate that those working outside the primary school sector did not believe that they have a professional identity. This finding was influenced by misunderstandings about the purpose of ECCE which are determined by societal values and priorities, the absence of a clearly understood defining terminology, and inadequate training requirements.

Describing the identity of the sector, Jennifer, an ECCE graduate, said:

Professional identity; I don’t know. . . if I had to say a colour, maybe gray because it is a gray area. Its low regard, low pay, low esteem, low professionalism, high turnover . . . They’re very bad characteristics of a professional sector.

However, managers claimed that the identity of the sector had ‘improved a lot from what it was 10 or 15 years ago’. This perceived improvement was linked to ‘policies, legislation and frameworks to support us as well as codes of ethics, ethical guidelines and all services are regulated by the HSE or support agencies such as National Children’s Nurseries Association or the Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association’. One manager with 14 years experience said that her role was ‘more recognised now’, but, in common with others she agreed that ‘there is still a long way to go’. As a result of policy initiatives, managers and staff agreed that there were expectations of staff to ‘act and behave as professionals towards each other, the children and families, other agencies and professionals’. Paradoxically, while ‘the recognition of the importance of ECCE in Ireland is continually growing’, those working in the sector ‘are not seen as professionals’.

Managers and staff stated that ECCE is a misunderstood concept. Consequently, the sector is beset by ambiguity, as reflected in the following commentary:

. . . it’s quite a difficult thing to convey to people . . . the identity of an early year worker or childcare worker . . . it can send different connotations to people that mightn’t necessarily be what we do . . . There can be an underestimation of the work . . . I think the image is that we play all day and that’s all we do.

There was a pervading sense that the work undertaken by ECCE staff is significantly misunderstood, which, in turn, leads to perceptions of staff as ‘just the baby sitter’. The concept of ECCE as a ‘childminding service’ was highlighted by both the pre-school and

primary school sectors. Frustration with this lack of understanding was palpable. Frances, who has been working in the sector for seven years, articulated the manner in which their role is misunderstood:

If you were to say to a person you have a primary teacher and you have a childcare worker then obviously we wouldn't be on a par in certain circles. But we are looking after children from zero to four and it's vital, if not more vital than at any other stage in a child's life. If you were to ask in the general public then they'd [teachers] be a lot higher than we'd be.

The lack of recognition is perceived to be a societal issue. Staff believed that parents perceived their role to be that of 'just minding'. Pointing to the traditional perception that education commences on starting primary school, they commented 'it wasn't like it was educating them or anything . . . it was always seen as, "I have to go to work and I need to get people to mind my child" so it's looked at as a babysitting service'. Interviewees suggested that parents have been aided in their perceptions by 'Government policies that were more concerned with getting women out to work than making sure the children had good care'. Alluding to the investment in ECCE throughout the past decade, one infant teacher said that the pre-school sector 'was left behind . . . we have lots of beautiful buildings, but what good are they if the staff aren't trained?'

Findings indicate a link between the weak identity of the sector and a societal perception that 'anybody can mind children'. This view was shared by ECCE graduates who stated that in their experience 'some parents did not recognise us as future professionals and although expected professional behaviour, still had the opinion that anybody could work with children'. Rose, an ECCE manager with 30 years experience, expressed her disappointment with societal attitudes towards the sector, claiming that when a child did not do well in state examinations, there was a belief 'she's not great but she can do childcare'. In her opinion, the childcare option was 'far too easy, we should be very fussy about who we let onto training courses and who we let work with children . . . the work we do is just too important'. This perception is fuelled by a perceived lack of 'interest from the Government'. According to managers, once the Government can 'tick all the boxes' they have done their job and basically they don't care who looks after the children'.

In attempting to convey the complexity of their role, staff stated that 'we're educating them, we're protecting them, and we're caring for them'. Accordingly, their work is 'more challenging than people realise'. Having highlighted the diversity of their work, managers, staff and graduates agreed that there is a pervading belief that children's education only commences on entry to primary school. Consequently, 'we will never have the status or the recognition that we deserve'.

While infant teachers and BEd students acknowledged that they have a professional identity, and that their work is recognised and valued by society in general, they were less confident about the value placed on their work by Government. They agreed that their identity 'is changing . . . it definitely is not as strong as it used to be'. According to a teacher with 30 years experience, 'things have changed a lot. I think when I taught first, things were far clearer, a delineation of roles, it's not as clear anymore'. There was consensus that parent attitudes are changing leading to 'less respect and cooperation' than in the past.

Many agreed that there was a perception of teaching as an 'easy job'. Students were especially conscious of this factor, stating that peers pursuing other disciplines saw teaching as a 'cushy number', 'the easy option' or 'involving no hardship'.

However, teachers argued that you 'earn your professional identity, you're a teacher . . . you went to college, but it's how you relate to children, how you deal with situations, who you are as a teacher over time'. They also felt that as you grow in confidence, you develop a professional identity and in turn 'you get respect' from parents. One teacher summarised this perspective, saying 'I think it's important that we as a profession ourselves believe in ourselves as professionals'. They expressed concern about how colleagues perceive them and suggested that there is a 'hierarchy' within the school system whereby infant teachers do not 'command the same respect as other teachers'. One teacher described how her peers saw her as somebody who 'just does art, music, fun and games'. Another stated that she was associated with 'fun subjects . . . as if there were no math, no phonics to be done', while another said that 'the public perception is that if you're teaching sixth class you're a better teacher than if you're teaching the young ones'. In general, teachers agreed that 'moving up a class is like getting a promotion'. This perception is driven by a belief that infant classes are similar to 'play school, we're only minding them until they're ready for real learning'.

In common with teacher's belief in themselves, community-based ECCE managers and staff argued that their professional identity is strong because 'we believe in it ourselves, it's not because the government or the public believe in it'. This self-belief springs from feeling valued within the community, as the following account illustrates:

In our community here . . . the parents know that we are professional, they appreciate what we are doing with the kids and it's very hard work, but they know we do the best we can. So, here in the community, I do feel we have a strong professional identity.

In counter point, the views of those working in the private sector were predominantly negative. They frequently used terms such as 'non-existent' and 'what identity'. Claire, who has 10 years experience, voiced her disquiet, saying 'we're considered babysitters with no training and no qualifications and we're just there to mind children'. They spoke of a patronizing attitude towards their work, saying that they are perceived as 'the girls who couldn't do anything else'.

Factors that shape professional identity

It is evident that interviewees are aware of a broad range of factors that shape their professional identity. These include feelings of belonging, being valued by peers, parents and wider society and effective policy. In terms of policy, ECCE staff expressed their dissatisfaction with implementation, stating that 'it all looks good on paper, there's lots of policy but it fails miserably in practice'. One teacher spoke of the link between tradition and identity. In her opinion, 'it's an Irish thing, it stems from tradition going back over fifty years, teachers have always been looked up to'. Mirroring this viewpoint, another teacher said that her parents refer to her as 'our daughter the teacher'. She pointed out that they would not refer to her siblings working in other professions in a similar manner. Because of her parent's pride in her profession, she feels proud to be a teacher and part of the teaching profession.

The most significant factor cited as shaping professional identity however, was the need for qualifications. Teachers said the fact that they 'go to college, we train to be teachers' had a considerable impact on their identity. It marks them as professionals: 'people know that we

are trained, they accept that we know what we're doing, that says it all'. Although they acknowledged that their identity is undergoing change they were confident that they are 'still very much seen as professionals by the majority . . . as long as our training keeps abreast of changes that will always be the case'.

ECCE personnel were less upbeat about their identity, laying the blame firmly on the lack of a training requirement. They expressed dissatisfaction with the requirement of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations 2006 regarding a suitable and competent adult. The refrain 'you only have to be a competent adult' and 'why would anyone bother to get trained' was reiterated. Managers condemned the short sightedness of the regulations, claiming that 'it sends out the wrong message' and 'we are attracting the wrong type of people into the sector'. There was agreement that the lack of a training requirement was seriously undermining their practice and their identity. In the words of one interviewee, 'if we want to be professional we must be trained. We won't be taken seriously unless everybody who works with a child is trained. Then we're all singing from the same hymn sheet'.

ECCE graduates were scathing in their criticism of the regulations. They claimed that the term competent adult is 'a total cop out', suggesting that 'if you don't define competent, you don't have to do anything about standards'. They further argued that competent can be translated as 'minimal'. Therefore it 'does nothing to put the sector on a professional footing'. In terms of defining a competent adult, graduates agreed that while a grandparent may be deemed a competent adult, the expectation changes 'if you're paying a pretty substantial amount of money every month to have your child cared and educated; I think there should be pretty clear distinction in the definition of those'. Equally, the lack of a mandatory training requirement was seen as 'an insult . . . no wonder people think that anybody can mind children'.

They agreed with those working in the sector that their professional identity was seriously undermined by the lack of a mandatory training requirement. In their opinion, 'all professions are characterised by their training _ nurses, doctors, teachers . . . the ECCE sector seems to be the only area where there is no mandatory requirement'. Adding to the confusion within the sector, some interviewees were unaware that there was no training requirement. One interviewee thought 'we all had to be trained. Doesn't everybody have to have a qualification now? I never realised that'. Similarly, while associating qualifications with professional identity, some teachers were of the opinion that there was a requirement for ECCE staff to be qualified:

I would consider a lot of people who work in the pre-school would have pursued courses and have qualifications in that area. . . . if you haven't . . . training in your . . . particular area say as a teacher or as a pre-school person then . . . I would think that you can't be professional.

ECCE graduates expressed their frustration with the present training system, claiming that it is 'just too easy to get a qualification'. In this respect, they suggested that 'childcare courses vary widely and some can be complete within a number of months'. Similarly, Rose asked 'what does it mean to be qualified . . . is it the girl with her one module, or two years or whatever?'. It was felt that this ad hoc approach to training is 'holding back practitioners from being recognised as professionals'.

Attitudes towards terms and conditions of employment

All participants associated professionalism with remuneration. There was consensus that the value of one's work is reflected in the salary attached to it and that, in turn, this impacts on feelings of confidence, success and identity. Overall, infant teachers were satisfied with their terms and conditions of employment. They agreed that they have 'regular hours of work, reasonable terms and conditions, decent enough salaries and good holidays'. Reflecting their changing status within society, they tempered these comments by emphasising that 'our work is challenging, trying, very difficult and the holidays are absolutely essential'. Accordingly, while there is a perception that teaching is an easy job, teachers were adamant that their work 'is never done'.

There were varying opinions on salaries. On the one hand, teachers felt that they 'are doing extremely well . . . things certainly changed very, very positively and the investment in education has benefitted all of us salary wise'. Others stated that the salary 'isn't astronomic but you can have a good living; a nice lifestyle but you'll never be a millionaire'. Two teachers, however, were less satisfied, stating that: 'for the work we do, it's certainly not reflected in our salaries'.

The disparity in pay, as well as terms and conditions of employment between the ECCE and primary sector, is a major issue. ECCE graduates were critical of B.Ed students who undertake a three-year training programme, after which:

They are qualified teachers . . . they can teach any child from age four to twelve. We have to do four years training to teach children from birth to six. . . We are expected to work for minimum wage, with longer hours and two weeks holidays.

Dissatisfaction with pay and conditions is considerable. Describing the work as 'stringent', one staff member said that it was 'depressing doing it for what you're actually paid and the conditions . . . like why bother, it's that bad'. Many spoke of working for 'little more than minimum wage'. This is demoralising for staff, who suggested that 'you can earn as much, even more, stocking shelves in a shop or selling burgers and you have no responsibilities'. Again, they stressed their belief that the poor salaries are an indication of the low status and lack of identity within the sector generally: 'the government isn't willing to deal with the salary issue, basically we're not important enough and parents want cheap childcare'.

Teachers empathised with ECCE staff, suggesting that 'they don't get paid to reflect the work they do . . . they certainly do not have the status, the professional status that a teacher has'. According to one teacher, 'I couldn't begin to imagine how difficult their work must be . . . I mean I have the children now at four and five, they had them a year before that . . . it must be unbelievable'. They agreed that pre-school is not valued within society, and in common with ECCE staff stated that '99% of that is because the government doesn't value it either'.

Perceptions of each other's professional identity

All ECCE personnel believe that teachers have a strong professional identity. This assertion is based on their belief that society values teachers because 'they educate the children; they do the real work'. They described the disparity between their role and the teacher's role:

Of course they have a professional identity, they teach the children. We don't do anything, we just play with them but they do the real work. Children don't learn

anything before they go to school. Look at the way they are paid and the holidays they get . . . we're only minding them that's why we get peanuts.

There was consensus among infant teachers that the ECCE sector does not have a professional identity. This belief was predominantly associated with lack of qualifications. One teacher highlighted the anomaly created by the lack of qualifications: 'we need a BEd to teach whereas they don't have to have a qualification. So Mary, from down the road can decide to turn her hand to running a cre`che'.

While the general consensus was that the sector is 'poorly trained and unprofessional', teachers were sympathetic towards BA ECCE graduates whom they suggested 'would be better off forgetting about the pre-school sector. It's a waste of their education . . . they will never have the recognition they deserve'. Referring to altering teacher identity, one teacher stated, 'whatever way the public sees or anyone sees primary school teachers; I would say pre-school teachers are well below that'. Likewise, other teachers said that if they as infant teachers are viewed as 'babysitters basically' then 'early years education is way further down the list'. Overall there was overwhelming agreement that those working in ECCE cannot 'expect to be seen as professional as long as they remain untrained'.

Aspirations for the future

All 10 BEd students were confident about the future. They were looking forward to teaching and aspired to 'having my own class'. They agreed that their priority after graduating was to 'get experience and hopefully a permanent job'. Referring to the current economic climate, they claimed that while permanent teaching posts may be more limited than in the past 'there is always a need for subbing and resource teaching'. They were equally enthusiastic about pursuing postgraduate training. 50% (5) of those interviewed were pursuing postgraduate studies at masters level, which they felt would help them 'in the long term with our teaching'.

The future is not as promising for ECCE graduates. While all 10 agreed that it was essential to 'get experience in the field', they did not intend to work in the sector indefinitely. Unlike the BEd students, getting experience was seen as a means to an end, after which graduates hope to 'work in the policy area maybe but definitely not in pre-school settings'. The primary reason related to the lack of a professional identity, meagre pay, and poor terms and conditions of employment. The following extract typifies graduate's responses:

I can't ever see myself working on a day to day basis directly with children without being depressed, unmotivated, unenthused and you know they're strong words to use but I can't. You asked about professional identity; that to me would put me off . . . at the end of the day you can't keep doing something for years with absolutely no recognition for it. As a person you can't. It sounds like an awful selfish thing to say as well but pay scales; I couldn't work, I know I couldn't and I know we're all used to hearing this but I didn't do four years in college to earn the minimum wage and that's the reality. I want to work in New Zealand . . . I want to experience what it feels like to work in a country where you're valued for working in the early years. I want to experience that, to feel valued.

Stating that 'there are no real opportunities out there for us', five of the graduates spoke of the possibility of 'converting to primary school teaching'. There was consensus that, having completed a degree in ECCE, they were 'over qualified' to work in cre`ches and pre-schools. It is for this reason that their primary focus is to get some experience in the field before moving on to work in an area where they feel they will be valued.

Conclusion

These findings add to existing knowledge about how professional identity within ECCE is constructed. It is clear, in so far as qualifications are critical to shaping professional identity, that affective domains including self-esteem, self-belief, job satisfaction and belonging are equally important. There is considerable disquiet with terms and conditions of employment. This is most evident in terms of remuneration described as being 'little more than minimum wage'. This has a significant negative impact on the affective components of identity, particularly in relation to professional confidence, self-esteem and job satisfaction. While tradition serves the primary school sector well in terms of teacher professional identity, it appears to diminish the identity of those working with young children outside of primary school, perpetuating a long held belief that 'anyone' can mind children.

Sachs (2003) claims that belonging to a community of practice is instrumental in shaping professional identity. Therefore, being accepted by peers, feeling that you belong and that you are valued within the workplace are significant aspects of professional identity. While a small number of infant teachers and ECCE staff stated that they felt valued within their schools and communities, in the main these aspects appear to elude pre-school and infant teachers.

A growing number of researchers suggest that professional identity is influenced by the perceptions that those working in ECCE have developed of themselves in relation to their value in society and their importance to children and families (Tucker 2004; Day et al. 2006; Flores and Day 2006). Teachers per se appear to enjoy a relatively high social status, yet their professional identity as infant teachers is compromised within individual school settings. They believe that this is related to a perception that the infant class is akin to playschool; similar to a waiting room for children before they move onto the higher classes, where their real learning occurs.

Within the pre-school sector, managerial discourse, characterised by authority, accountability and effectiveness is prevalent, while democratic discourse remains peripheral to practice and consequently to professional identity. There is little evidence of the richness and complexity of professional identity as promulgated by Sachs (2001). In fact, it appears that conditions of respect, mutuality and communication deemed central to nurturing this richness and complexity are sadly lacking.

As this paper indicates, lack of recognition regarding the complexity of working with young children at both Government and societal level has a cascading effect on the sector. Consequently, the ECCE workforce is characterised by a marked absence of professional identity. While highlighted by infant teachers this issue is endemic within the pre-school sector. Nonetheless, when we examine the values, principles and assumptions on which ECCE policy is based, a very different picture emerges.

Training and ongoing development are recognised as inextricable elements in professional practice. In the absence of these fundamental tenets, the workforce cannot grow, flourish or stand proud as a profession with its own strong unique identity. ECCE is underpinned by an unhealthy dissonance that is fraught with disappointment and frustration. Irrespective of the many policy initiatives aimed at supporting its development, the sector is highly stratified and beset by inequalities. This paper shows a clear link between qualifications and professional identity. Notwithstanding this evidence, there is compelling evidence that highly trained and

skilled BA ECCE graduates are being lost to the sector. It is clear that the future development of ECCE is at a critical juncture.

A number of fundamental questions remain unanswered. What is the purpose of ECCE? What is the value, as a society, that we place on children's early care and education? What is the value, as a society, that we place on those working with young children at pre-school and infant level in primary school? The answers to these questions lie at the heart of advancing the professional identity of the sector. There is an absolute need to move beyond the competencies discourse within the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006, with its connotations of minimal standards, to examining closely the various standards frameworks that underpin ECCE.

Crucially, there is a need to revisit the values, principles and assumptions that underpin these standards frameworks in order to generate a set of core common principles by which the sector will forthwith be identified. The development and implementation of standards frameworks alone is insufficient. Doubtless, if and when they are implemented, such frameworks will positively influence professionalism within ECCE. They must also, however, impact terms and conditions of employment as well as professional status as enjoyed by other professionals such as primary teachers. In effect, this entails significant fiscal investment and innovative responses at Government level in supporting the establishment and ongoing development of a professional ECCE workforce. Put simply, we must heed calls to develop a coherent, recognisable body of professional practice. In light of the findings within this study, can we afford not to?

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