



Facilitating progression: towards a 'fit for purpose' progression model for early years practitioners

Final report of the Barriers and Solutions project to the Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull Lifelong Learning Network Progression Agreement subgroup

January 2009

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1. Introduction and context

This final dissemination report summarises the findings and recommendations of stages two and three of the LLN funded project 'Barriers and solutions: facilitating progression for early year's practitioners'.

As outlined in the previous report raising the qualification profile of workers in the child care sector is now a major policy imperative and the Children's Workforce Strategy seeks to ensure that a practitioner educated to a minimum of Foundation Degree level is in post in every Children's Centre by 2010 and in every full day care setting, including those in the private, voluntary and independent, sector by 2015. Year one of this project, published at <http://www.bbcslin.ac.uk/summary/hsceye/outcome/HSCEYE3.pdf> provided a quantitative summary of the qualification profile of the Early Years workforce in the both the region and sub-regions and offered a 'balance sheet' analysis of progression opportunities for those practitioners already qualified to level 3 and therefore in a position to progress to higher education.

Building on the findings from year one, a qualitative case study research was undertaken in year two of the project to explore, describe and analyse the career trajectories and aspirations of a range of practitioners at different stages in their professional development. Crucially this stage of the study identifies and reports on the barriers to and triggers for engagement in the various forms of professional learning at level 4 identified in year one. The findings reported here support the contention of the proposing team that there is currently a deficit of high quality, appropriately and relevantly presented and disseminated qualitative information about the career development of professionals in this relatively emergent field.

2. Method

The data for this project was collected from three private and voluntary sector Early Year's settings within the region. The sample included a small on-campus nursery at a local HEI, a medium sized city centre setting and a larger nursery belonging to a corporate chain. The selection was designed to enable comparisons and contrasts to be drawn across different types of setting.

In total 20 practitioners were interviewed, a representative sample from across the three settings. The sample included all practitioners qualified to level 3 and therefore able to progress to level 4 and other practitioners who expressed an interest in participating including one participant who was level 2 qualified and working towards level 3. The breakdown by qualification was as follows:

- 3 qualified to level 4 or working towards a Foundation degree
- 16 qualified to level 3
- 1 qualified to level 2

The group also included two managers and one deputy manager.

All 20 respondents were female; no male practitioners were employed at any of the three settings.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken by members of the research team (see appendix 1). Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify patterns and trend. The project proposal was submitted to the Ethics Committee at the University of Wolverhampton and participant anonymity has been maintained throughout the project as a requirement of ethical approval.

3. Findings

3.1. Routes in to Early Years Practice

Participants were invited to outline what had motivated them to choose a career in the early years. Responses tended to fall into two distinct groups: those under 30 who had always wanted to work with young children and were fulfilling long term aspirations and those over 30 who had made more contingent employment decisions and had 'found' themselves in a childcare role often as an outcome of having had their own children.

Participants in the first category were more likely to have undertaken pre-service training or to have progressed directly from school or college to employment as a childcare professional, a typical response

“[I] did course at college, then straight into nannying then into nursery”

“[it's the] greatest gift to help the children learn and meeting their needs”

Participants in the second category described more 'iterative' career journeys and were more likely to have come to early years through their experience of mothering:

“I really enjoy [my job]. Did SEN, had my own child and went into childminding and then onto childcare”;

“after having my own children I wanted to go into Nursery work”;

“why did I come into it? More so because I had a daughter and I thought I could take her to work with me so I did that and did my qualification on from that. [I like it because] the hours. And I only work term time so I get to spend time with my family. I do enjoy working with children....it works around my children's school, I work from 8.15am so my mum takes them to school, but I'm thereto pick them up after so it's really handy.”

There was a shared perception of the complementarity of parenting and early years working with many participants reporting a good 'fit' between their work and their domestic responsibilities thus enabling them to enjoy a good work life balance. For some participants the stepping stones into a career in early years practice marked a steady transition from the informal 'practice of care' in the private, home space to voluntary participation and finally into a professional caring role:

“...started with children when my little girl went to playschool and it was voluntary where they ask the parents to stay, and it went from there basically. When my daughter went to school I carried on with playschool helping. Then I took a year out then went and worked in a school as a lunchtime supervisor, which was easy with my daughter being at school. I did that for about 8 years.”

In some instances working with children represented a first route in to becoming economically active.

All participants expressed high levels of job satisfaction. Only two reported having worked outside the sector and in both cases this was felt to be a negative experience. Sarah had obtained an NNEB qualification and then worked as a nanny had had a short break from her work in early years “I left to work in a factory with my mum making car aerials and don't ask me why but I hated...this is the first job I enjoy and I've been here for nearly 2 years.” Another participant, Sue, had started her career in care working with the elderly but had not enjoyed it and had made the change to child care. Sue's experience of working across the care sector may further illustrate that care work may be a 'common sense' or 'obvious' option for this group of workers, rather than a career of 'choice'.

3.2 Motivation to progress

Having achieved a level 3 qualification the vast majority of practitioners stated they were happy and settled in their jobs and found the work rewarding. Some commented they wanted to complete additional training to develop their skills but not particularly in the form of a Foundation Degree Arts (FdA). Short CPD courses, such as first aid were seen as enjoyable and worthwhile.

A misconception of some of the practitioners was that FdA qualifications were to be compulsory in the future and this was seen as “*frightening*” interestingly this was at the setting where no one had yet completed a qualification above level 3 but the owners were working towards this. At this setting no connection was made between the qualifications levels of staff (beyond the statutory requirement) and the quality of education and care children might experience. This was in marked contrast to the setting where the manager was completing her degree. Here the perception of practitioners was that gaining higher level qualifications would be beneficial both to the practitioner personally, as they would have more knowledge of early years practice and additionally to the

children who would benefit from the practitioners increased knowledge that would impact on and improve practice. At this setting the perception was that the FdA might be hard work but "... it pays off in the end so ... it's worth it."

When considering future careers many of the younger practitioners were happy to continue in their present role or to gain promotion within their current setting, for example to "room leader." The perceived benefits of completing an FdA were summed up by one of the relatively newly qualified level 3 practitioners Liz who confidently maintained: "I think you can get further in your line of work. Better pay. You can get better jobs and different kinds of work, not just in a nursery setting; you can get better jobs in different kinds of places". This view was echoed by many of the experienced practitioners who expressed an interest in career progression outside the PVI sector, for example aspiring to become a lecturer, teacher, teaching assistant or assessor, in addition one practitioner was keen to open her own nursery. There was a view expressed by some practitioners that working in a school setting was a higher status and therefore more aspirational job.

3.3 Support for progression

Practitioners' assessments of the support they would get for undertaking higher level qualifications indicated that they anticipated and valued support from friends, family and peers very highly. By contrast they expressed mixed feelings about the levels of support they would expect to receive from managers and employers (see 3.4.2 for commentary).

The role of family in an Early Years Practitioners decision to undertake higher level qualifications is complex and creates powerful tensions. The evidence from this research indicates these tensions can result in support for or barriers to progression, these are closely related to personal and vocational development.

Practitioners generally believed they would receive support if they decided to move onto higher level study. It was clear they felt their families would be supportive both practically, for example helping with childcare and emotionally. In one case a practitioner's daughter had been responsible for encouraging her to take further qualifications. Practitioners who had already progressed to level 4 studies or above supported this assumption, their families had supported their decision to study at a higher level and had offered practical and emotional support throughout their study. One practitioner's perception was that training is aimed at those less than 25 years of age. This is in contrast to the overall findings of this research which indicates practitioners undertaking higher level qualifications are over 30 years of age.

3.4 Barriers to progression

Progression was influenced by a range of issues, some of the barriers evident in the data are summarised below

3.4.1. Family responsibilities

For those practitioners with family commitments there was an acknowledgment that generally their family needs “come first”, taking priority over study and preventing them from undertaking higher level study, an example of this was “...children doing exams”. Whilst it is accepted this may be the case, it could also be argued that using this type of reason to justify lack of progression could be an avoidance strategy. What the data does suggest is that family relationships and responsibilities are just as likely to represent (or be presented as) a barrier to progression as they are a source of inspiration and encouragement.

3.4.2. Support from employer

Although many practitioners found their family to be supportive of their aspirations they did not always have the same perception of their employers.

In one of the settings practitioners reported that in order to obtain their NVQ qualifications they had received support from peers and colleagues within the setting, this support was valued by the practitioners and it was felt it had supported the acquisition of higher level qualifications, for example from level 2 to level 3. This type of support was mirrored in another setting facilitating progression between NVQ3 and Foundation Degree (FdA), this is evidenced by a practitioner currently undertaking an FdA Early Years who stated that she had been struggling with her level four but went on to say “...I’m getting support from here [the setting], and I can bring my assignments in and she’ll [the manager] look at them.” This support was viewed as very positive. The support of peers is clearly valued by practitioners; this type of support is an untapped resource which could be further developed by facilitating cluster groups. In contrast in another setting the lack of management awareness of degree level study was seen as a barrier to progression, this may be a key factor impacting on level 3 to 4 progression.

It could be argued that settings who do not currently have staff qualified above level 3 may not see the benefits of higher level qualifications and therefore do not encourage staff to undertake them. The impact on qualification progression for settings with and without staff with higher level qualifications would be worthy of further study.

3.4.3. Leadership and Management

The lack of an independent professional body for early years practitioners, such as the General Teaching Council for Teachers in compulsory education and the Institute for Learning for Teachers in Further Education, means that external drivers for settings to support practitioner progression are heavily focused on statutory regulations governing compliance rather than on the development or ‘entitlement’ of individuals. It is also possible that the SME status of the private nursery creates an additional tension with investment in

professional development potentially at odds with business imperatives. Evidence from our data suggests that for these few managers at least there are real tensions between supporting development and maintaining the stability of the workforce. One manager explained that cost of paying for cover precluded sustained time out for professional development whilst another expressed concern about the potential impact of up-skilling on the stability of her staffing;

“you will lose nursery nurses into teaching and lose the stability within the nurseries because staff will move on.”

The manager above also draws attention to the structural inequalities (pay, conditions, status) between the maintained and non-maintained sectors and the instabilities these generate for PVI settings.

Whilst we did not find evidence in our data to suggest that these managers were threatened by highly skilled employees there are examples in the research literature (Perkins 2008)¹, to indicate that some managers do feel this way.

The manager was most commonly cited as the source of information advice and guidance about career development and in some cases this was seen as ‘honest brokerage’. Two participants specifically mentioned having used the internet and two reported having attended a college open day, one participant suggested a careers advisor could help but hadn’t made use of this service herself. Some participants had received advice from college tutors whilst undertaking their existing qualifications but there was little awareness of progression routes beyond level 3 and no definite understanding of where to seek independent advice. None of the participants seemed to be aware of the role of the CWDC. As a consequence the attitudes and values of the manager to progression, and the FdA in particular, impacted significantly on the beliefs and attitudes of practitioners. The effect of this was contingent upon the particularities of a manager’s own experience and left practitioners reliant upon second hand, ‘Chinese whispers’. In one setting the manager’s experience of embarking on an FdA confirmed ‘worst fears’ about ‘hard work’, ‘worrying assessments’ and ‘deadlines’. In another training was perceived only to be for the under 25s. These examples contrast starkly with the support offered by the manager described above in 3.4.2 who had successfully achieved her FdA, held qualifications in high regard and inspired her colleagues to undertake new challenges.

¹ Perkins, H. (2008) *Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree Graduates, Where Are They Now? A study to investigate the impact of the Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree on graduates' personal and professional lives..* Unpublished MA Dissertation , University of Sheffield

3.4.4. Notions of professionalism

The participants did not express a strong sense of their 'professional' standing or particularly see themselves as part of a professional community beyond their own setting. There was no awareness of the ten year strategy or the current policy drive to 'professionalise' the workforce. Some participants made reference to the view that their work rated as 'second class' to school teachers or lecturers but this perspective was not challenged by any of the participants. The common sense of 'progression' to the maintained sector remained a given.

For some attainment of level 3 was seen to be a marker of higher level competence at which they were "happy and settled" and "comfortable" they therefore didn't "see the point in taking more courses". However that is not to say that there was not a willingness or aspiration to extend knowledge and understanding simply that for many "the classroom" did not seem an obvious place to do this.

For some the 'new professionalism', of which the FdA was a part, represented a distraction from the hands on child care aspect of their work. Their perception of progression was that this took them into a new area of practice that required taking responsibility for dealing with parents and money was not what many of our participants aspired to, they did not want to expose themselves to judgements beyond their 'chalk face' practice with children.

3.4.5. Self and identity

Many of the barriers identified thus far are extrinsic, however participants were just as likely to cite intrinsic 'barriers' that related to their self-identities. Although these were most often 'negative presentations' of their identities as learners, which are perhaps just as likely to be 'strategic' as they are measured assessments, they also related to parenting identities. Responses fell into four broad categories;

- Firstly those that related to 'life course' and the place inhabited within the family. For many participants their mothering identity and their responsibilities to their own children transcended their commitment to developing their professional identity. This was especially pertinent for a participant who had a range of caring responsibilities beyond her role as parent.
- Secondly those that identified themselves as insufficiently motivated or driven, "[I'm too] lazy, can't be bothered to go back to college."
- Thirdly those that did not identify themselves as 'academic', "[I] will avoid writing and don't like reading".
- Fourthly those that did not feel confident about their own abilities, "when you've been out of education for so long you think can I do it?" and identified the classroom as a "worrying" space or even "frightening" space.

It is essential to exercise interpretive caution with this data and the writing team are particularly keen to signpost the academic literature at this point in the report. Writers concerned with the impact of structural relations such as gender and class raise invite a consideration of the complexities of identity construction and thus the inadequacies of decontextualised analysis.

“poor self-esteem or lack of confidence are not individual traits or personality failings but the product of social relations” (Leathwood, 2003:609)²

“the experiences of students, in particular their differential access to information about higher education, illustrates the need to unpack issues of ethnicity and class in relation to dominant cultural capital...Institutional habitus are the contribution of social networks, and less tangible factors such as confidence, certainty and a sense of entitlement “ (Reay, 1998:522)³

However what is clear from the data is that for many of our participants some ‘barriers’ to progression manifest as intrinsic and are bound to core understandings of self and identity. This report will recommend that a tailored progression strategy must take account of such issues.

4. Summary

- For some practitioners status is not a key motivator and career progression is not a high priority and therefore once the statutory requirements have been fulfilled there is no motivation to progress. This group of practitioners do not necessarily see themselves as ‘learner’ and do not value knowledge for knowledge sake. They often understand their work as an extension of their core or most valued identities as parents/carers.
- Practitioners have only limited awareness of the CWDC or formal careers frameworks
- Access to careers advice is limited, even where the nursery is based on an HEI campus and outreach IAG may be of value to these practitioners
- Family, friends and peers are a significant influence on perceptions of progression

³ Reay, Diane (1998) ‘always knowing’ and ‘never being sure’ familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice, journal of education policy, 13:4, 519-529

- The attitude of the manager to her own staff development, particularly where she is engaged in higher level study, is a crucial factor in the way that higher level learning and professional development is perceived and understood within a setting. Training of managers to present higher level training is crucial and to understand the impact of their own training and attitudes to training on the workforce is crucial
- Identity as a parent has a strong influence on the career trajectory of this group of workers and their interest in or willingness to progress
- A tension exists between understanding of 'professional' and 'self-acquired' tacit and experiential knowledge bases
- Gender identity may be an important factor in career choice
- To what extent are nurseries 'learning organisations'? Does the commercial aspect of the PVI sector preclude the development of learner identities? What can be done to overcome this in the absence of a statutory baseline qualification or national above level 2?

5. Progression agreement framework

Drawing on the outcomes of this project it is recommended that a tailored progression framework for early years practitioners in the PVI sector must;

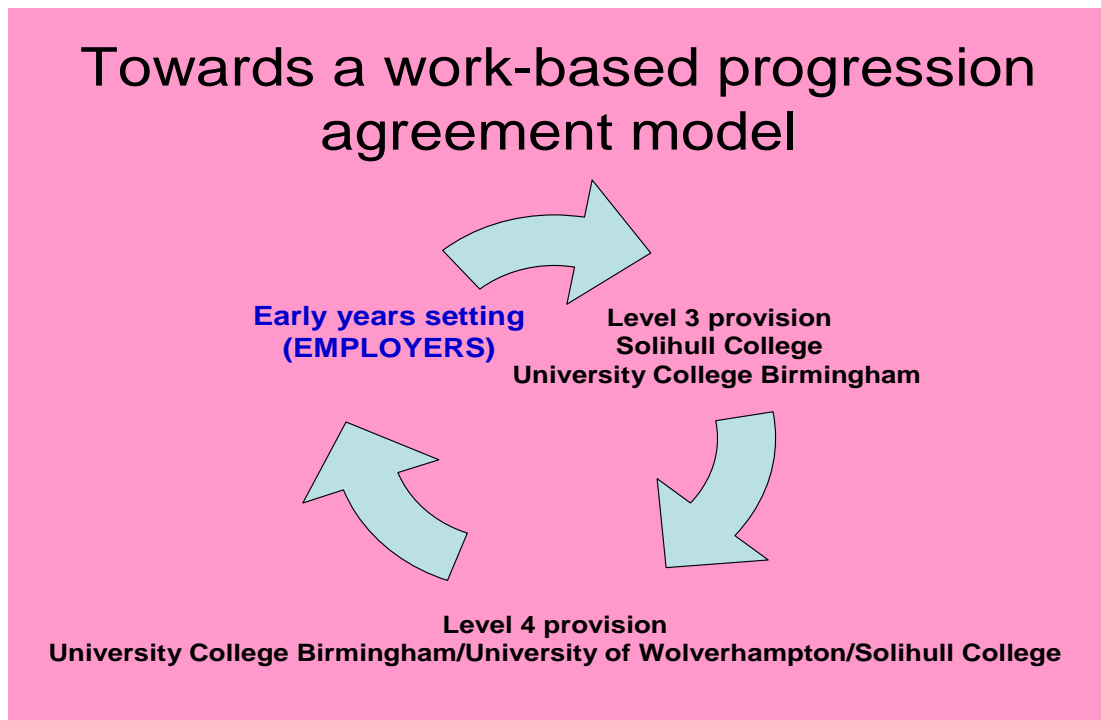
- include the employer as a key partner;
- facilitate the development of meaningful, dynamic *partnerships* between *people* in the signatory organisations
- pay proper regard to the "the connections between educational and wider social contexts." (Reay, 2001:343)⁴

This will mean;

- facilitating flexible, impartial IAG opportunities and 'honest brokerage' for practitioners using 'outreach' modes of delivery;
- consideration of short course 'bridging' programmes that enable practitioners to 'build up' to level 4 study by achieving early wins;
- connecting practitioner to 'survivors' of higher level study and their and 'success stories' and perhaps offering mentoring and buddying
- specifying for the employer and the practitioner the levels of commitment required by the programme and outline the support needs that need to be in place in addition to the entry qualifications;

- in the absence of a professional body facilitating local networks that enable practitioners to see themselves as members of a wider professional community and to value the work that they do and the contribution they make to young people's lives;
- clear articulations of how the responsibilities of each of the partners in facilitating the progression process

A model based on the involvement of the organisations involved in this project is illustrated below;



Recommendations

The implementation of such a detailed 'people-orientated' framework requires that further work be done to;

- develop and implement a model of outreach IAG appropriately tailored in terms of content and 'pedagogy' for this group of workers;
- careful consideration of 'who' will fulfil the educational liaison roles to ensure that the progression agreement is appropriately implemented;
- develop as part of a dynamic approaches to IAG a mentoring and buddying process;
- develop a network of practice to support the continuing professional development of practitioners in this sector, targeting particularly those at level 3.

APPENDIX 1

Section 1: Informal reflection on vocational history since school. The story of their professional lives so far

1. Why early years work? Motivation for this vocational sector
2. How did you get to where you are now? What brought you to this point in your career?
3. Highest level of early years qual?
4. Any other info regarding GCSEs or other L2/ L3 qual? Schooling in general?
5. Length of time working in early years?
6. Happy working in early years?
7. Length of time at this nursery?
8. Age. Crucial variable.

Section 2: The Future

1. What are your thoughts about a next step in your working life?
2. What do you think are your options for the future? What are the next quals for you?
3. Have other practitioners taken steps that you would like to follow?
4. Do you feel well informed about what your next options might be?
5. Where would you go or who would you talk to to find out more?

Section 3: Barriers

1. How do you feel about taking another step in your career?
2. Do you think there are any barriers you might face?
3. How do you feel about FD degrees and universities for example?
4. Do you feel encouraged to take a next step by work, family, partners etc?