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'I think a lot of it is common sense. ...' Early years students, professionalism and the development of a 'vocational habitus'

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‘I think a lot of it is common sense. ...’ Early years students, professionalism and the development of a ‘vocational habitus’

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This paper reports on research from a small-scale project investigating the vocational training of students in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England. We draw on data from interviews with 42 students and five tutors in order to explore the students’ understandings of professionalism in early years. In the paper, we discuss first, the then Labour Government’s drive to ‘professionalise’ the workforce and second, critically analyse the concept of professionalism, drawing on sociological literature. We then turn to the data, and argue that students’ understandings of professionalism are limited to generic understandings of ‘professional’ behaviour (reliability, politeness, punctuality and so on). The idea of their occupation being a repository of a particular knowledge and skills set is undercut by the students’ emphasis on work with young children being largely a matter of ‘common sense’. Our fourth point is to highlight the processes by which students are inducted into a respectable and responsible carer identity, as illustrated by an emphasis on clothes and appearance. We conclude that the version of professionalism offered to students training at this level is highly constrained, and discuss the implications of this.

Keywords: gender; class; early years

Introduction

‘I think a lot of it is common sense, I kept thinking, why do I have to write this when it is common sense to do it.’ (Elaine)

‘Childcare is just common sense really. It is all common sense.’ (Abha)

‘It’s common sense really, most of it.’ (Kathy)

This paper reports on research from a small-scale project investigating the vocational training of students in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In this paper, we focus on examining the notion of ‘being a professional’, briefly exploring policy documents, and then students’ and tutors’ perceptions of what behaviours, attitudes and knowledge constitute being a ‘professional’ in ECEC. We ask additionally, are all or only some, of the varied workforce in this field, professionals?

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The project

The data on which we are drawing comes from interviews, completed in 2009, with 42 level 2 and level 3 students¹ at two different Further Education (FE) colleges. The colleges were chosen because of their strength in providing ECEC courses and their contrasting student bodies in ethnic terms. One, Westbrook, is an inner city college, located in a socially mixed area of London and serving a diverse clientele in terms of ethnicity. The second, Cedar Park, is a large college located just outside Greater London. The clientele here are more homogenous in terms of ethnicity (largely white). We conducted our initial interviews in most cases with pairs of students, who volunteered to speak to us, and chose their own partner. Our rationale was that the students (many of whom were school leavers) would be more comfortable talking with a friend present (although we did interview students alone if they signalled themselves as willing), and for the most part, they were indeed loquacious and forthcoming. We then followed up that first round of interviews with individual interviews with 18 of the students, conducted between six months and a year later than the initial interview. Out of the 42 students whom we interviewed, just three were men. The majority of the interviewees (27) were white British (see Table 1). The students' ages varied between 16 and 49 (33 were between 16 and 21). The students were mostly from working-class backgrounds, with 24 mothers (out of 42) having jobs which were either in semi-routine, routine occupations or were long-term unemployed/never worked (Table 2). With the older students, working in childcare (itself class 3), we also asked about partners' occupations.²

Data analysis began early on in the process of data collection, and with the use of both Nvivo and hand coding (using Straussian techniques, Strauss 1987), we built up a portfolio of themes and issues which was subject to continuing review and revision. This portfolio was informed by the original research questions (the first of these – on the processes of becoming a 'professional' and what that means for the values, practices and sense of identity of the students – directly feeds into this paper. The second set of questions focused on students' understandings and enactments of their relationships with children and parents). Additionally, detailed coding of the transcripts focused our attention on other themes we had not originally anticipated (e.g. the importance to the students of their success on their course as a way of reinventing themselves as 'good learners', see Vincent and Braun 2010). Careful comparisons were undertaken within the data and a fine-grained examination of particular themes, such as notions of professionalism and being 'the right person for the job' (developed here), and emotion work (see Vincent and Braun 2011), was conducted. The argument presented here was developed from the

Table 1. Ethnicity.

	Westbrook College <i>n</i> = 26	Cedar Park College <i>n</i> = 16	All students <i>n</i> = 42
White UK	12	15	27
Black African/Caribbean	5	0	5
Asian	4	1	5
Mixed race	3	0	3
White other	1	0	1
Other	1	0	1

Table 2. Students' social class background.

Class	Mothers (<i>n</i> = 42)	Fathers (<i>n</i> = 42)
1.1 Large employers and higher managerial occupations	0	0
1.2 Higher professional occupations	0	0
2 Lower managerial and professional occupations	4	4
3 Intermediate occupations	8	2
4 Own account workers	5	9
5 Lower supervisory and technical occupations	0	3
6 Semi-routine occupations	14	6
7 Routine occupations	2	6
8 Never worked and long-term unemployed	8	3
Not enough information/not known	1	9

data. As it is impossible to include anything like a full qualitative data-set in a paper of this length, those quotations included are representative but also illustrative. The quotations in each case stand for a whole range of other examples that were categorised within the same theme.

Government, early years and professionalism

Our study overall focuses upon the processes by which students on childcare courses acquire, interpret and inhabit a 'vocational habitus' (Colley et al. 2003). Vocational habitus refers to 'a powerful aspect of the vocational culture: the combination of idealised and realised dispositions to which students must orient themselves in order to become 'the right person for the job' (Colley 2006, 25). In this paper, we consider what version, if any, of professionalism contributes to the students' vocational habitus. The focus of our study on students, rather than experienced workers, serves to differentiate it from much of the existing research on practitioners' understandings of professionalism (e.g. Kinos 2008; Osgood 2008). However, we also accept that the students' views may change as they get older and (perhaps) more embedded in their working identities, and as they experience different work settings and further training and development.

Urban (2008), writing about OECD countries, notes that there has been an increased governmental focus in recent years on early years provision, driven by a common concern to encourage women into the labour market and enhance economic competitiveness. The concern about increasing the amount of early years provision is generally coupled with a recognition that provision has to be of good quality.³ In order to try and ensure this, there has been growing amounts of regulation of early childhood services in countries both within and without Europe (Kinos 2008; Oberheumer 2005). The quality of the workforce is understood by academics and policy makers to be central to good quality provision (e.g. HM Treasury 2004; Sylva et al. 2004) so 'the discourses on "quality" and "professionalism" seem to merge without difficulty at first sight' (Urban 2008, 138). In the UK, there have been major state interventions in early years, and during the election campaign of 2010, Labour's investment (particularly) and intervention (less so) in this area were often cited as notable successes (e.g. Toynbee 2010). Recent UK policy documents focus on raising the quality of the workforce and the status of working with young

children. The main mechanism for this was raising the levels of credentials throughout the workforce, through plans to increase minimum entry-levels of qualification (with level 3 credentials being a desired minimum level for all), simplifying the existing maze of qualifications, providing clearer pathways of career progression, emphasising the provision of opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) and the establishment of graduate-led posts in ECEC settings, known as early years professional status (EYPS) (see DCSF 2008, 2009; DfES 2005):

This strategy is about our plans to create and support a world-class workforce which is increasingly competent and confident to make a difference to the lives of those they support. Such a workforce will be one that people aspire to join and are loath to leave. (DfES 2005, Forward)

The Ten Year Strategy for Childcare (HM Treasury 2004) acknowledged the low status of the occupational group, and asserted that, ‘...working with pre-school children should have as much status as a profession as teaching children in schools’ (2004 ch. 4). *Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare: Building on the Ten Year Strategy* (DCSF 2009) notes that what is required is a ‘first rate workforce that is professionalised at all levels’ (para 4.2, 39).

It should be emphasised that these are documents from the last Labour Government, but are still relevant, as, as yet, the Coalition Government have not focused on workforce development (see postscript for details). Labour’s policy documents appear to promise much to a workforce traditionally composed of poorly paid, working-class women (Cooke and Lawton 2008). They offer a recognition that not only is the work of caring for small children demanding, but also that it requires particular expertise, and involves the exercising of particular skills and knowledge. A promise of professionalism, in other words. However, this is not as straightforward as it might appear. We proceed through two main strands of argument. The first is to problematise the label of ‘professional’, and the second is to consider the form and nature of professionalism in ECEC as it appears to be currently constituted.

Professionals, professionalism, and ECEC reviewed

Definitions of professionalism and professionals abound and the notions are contested (for overview see Evetts 2003), but the following traditional definition is a useful starting point. It holds that professions are characterised by,

the monopolization of particular forms of expertise, the erection of social boundaries around them through entrance qualifications and extended training, and an ideology of public service and altruism – that is, they claim to serve higher goals than merely economic self interest (Abbott and Meerabeau 1990, 2, also Urban 2008).

ECEC work would easily fulfil the latter criterion. As with other caring work, such as nursing, the care and education of young children is commonly understood to be a morally worthy occupation, a vocation, and a site of altruism (see Vincent and Braun 2010). However, the other criteria are more problematic. The ‘particular forms of expertise’ that inform ECEC are multi-disciplinary, with developmental psychology, itself a broad field, being a major influence. As we suggest later in the paper, the disciplinary knowledge being communicated to students on levels 2 and 3 courses is somewhat amorphous and diluted.⁴

Abbott and Meerabeau (1990, 8) argue that such traditional definitions of a profession were constituted around medicine and law – traditionally male professions, and thus occupations, particularly caring occupations, dominated by women (nursing, social work, ECEC) require a different understanding of what constitutes a profession. One focal point they suggest is the degree of ‘autonomy or control’ over the work (4). As we discuss below, this is a difficult area for ECEC workers as their practice is regulated by government policy (e.g. the early years foundation stage (EYFS) framework and regulation through OfSTED, see below). The relationship of ECEC workers with consumers or clients of the service also complicates the traditional professional/client relationship, which derives from client ignorance and their need for professional expert knowledge (Johnson 1972). Claiming exclusive ownership of an area of knowledge is a difficult claim for many ECEC workers for four reasons. First, there is a common view that paid caring for and even educating young children is a derivation of mothering, a set of nurturing skills that comes ‘naturally’ to women. Apesora-Varano (2007) argues that there is a ‘widespread perception that neither knowledge nor skills are necessary to perform caring’ (258), and that women have the ability to care by virtue of their gender. Second, many mothers of young children would make a counter claim that they are the ‘experts’ on their child. Third, knowledge about the general development of young children, developmental ‘milestones’, and strategies to enhance emotional, social and cognitive development is in wide circulation via other related occupations (health visitors for instance) but also via the media and the Internet. Fourth, ECEC work, like other ‘caring occupations’, also lacks some of the traditional markers of a profession in terms of the nature of the work. Many such jobs are not limited to, but do include manual work (in this case, the physical care of babies and young children requires changing nappies, feeding and so on), thereby disturbing the brains/brawn dichotomy inherent in many definitions of professional/manual work. There are, then, clear difficulties in aligning ECEC work with traditional definitions of professionalism. However, as Evetts (2006) points out, the ‘traits’ approach (defining the particular characteristics of professional work) outlined above is limited and does not explain the appeal of ‘being a professional’ (519). Evetts (2003, 2006) and other recent commentators (Fournier 1999; Waring and Waring 2009) argue that the labels of ‘professional’ and ‘professionalism’ act as ‘disciplinary logics’ (Fournier 1999, 290), a mechanism through which the work and behaviour of occupational groups can be regulated and controlled. Fournier, in a study of the application of the label ‘professional’ to occupational groups not normally designated in those terms, argues, ‘the mobilisation of the discursive resources of professionalism potentially allows for control at a distance through the construction of “appropriate” work identities and conducts’ (1999, 281). Similarly, Waring and Waring (2009) comment, ‘the language of professionalism becomes a mechanism for fostering occupational compliance that encourages employees to act ‘professionally’ through realigning identities and working practices’ (345). Therefore, ‘being a professional’ does not simply include familiarity with a specific body of knowledge, but also what sort of person one is, how one appears and conducts oneself, and how far all these behaviours are deemed by others to be appropriate professional conduct (Fournier 1999).

Foucault famously argued that professionals or ‘experts’ are constructed as part of the state’s attempts to manage the population – in this case parents and children. Professionals, especially those in health, welfare and education roles identify, normalise, categorise and objectify their clients. Following Foucault, Evetts notes, ‘the

professions were intimately involved in these processes of normalization which were crucial to the reproduction of legitimate power in the liberal democratic state' (2003, 405). This process requires the authority of professionals and thereby that of the state to be generally accepted. However, it is clear that professional groups are differently located in relation to the state, being more or less able to operate independently (Johnson 1972). With reference to some groups of professionals, including welfare professionals, Johnson (1972) highlights the process of state *mediation*. This refers to the state intervening in relationships between producer and consumer in order to define needs and how they will be met. Thus, for some occupational groups, the process of state management impacts on members of that group themselves as much as on their client groups (Goodson and Dowbiggin 1990, 107). Indeed, Evetts (2003) talking about the present day, notes that for many professional groups, state-imposed accountability and performance indicators are central to their work, and even the traditionally independent profession of medicine, which still retains some power to construct its own definition of professionalism, is not exempt. She suggests that the promise of autonomy, client trust and ownership of an area of expertise, implicit in the label of 'professional' is very often a myth:

The reality of the professionalism that is actually envisaged is very different ... [and] includes the substitution of organizational for professional values; bureaucratic and managerial controls rather than collegial relations and management trust; budgetary restrictions and rationalizations, performance targets and accountability and sometimes increased political control. (525)

Her account seems to accurately describe the position of the ECEC workforce. The currently still dominant version of ECEC professionalism which emanated from Labour government policy has been criticised for imposing a centrally defined agenda which is deeply inscribed by performativity and managerialism (Moyles 2001; Osgood 2006; Urban 2008). Moss (2006) for example argues that autonomy in the workplace for all ECEC practitioners has been much reduced by the introduction of EYFS curriculum framework and the regulatory regime of which it is part, to the extent that the carer is repositioned as a 'technician'. This view appears supported by the Liberal Democrat 2010 manifesto which promised to replace the 'bureaucratic' EYFS 'with a slimmed down framework' (35). Indeed, in the summer of 2010, the Coalitions' Liberal Democrat Children's Minister Sarah Teather announced a review of EYFS with the aim of making it less 'rigid'. Teather was quoted as saying 'Professionals deserve to have the freedom to do their jobs and not have to deal with unnecessary bureaucracy'. In March 2011 the Tickell Review did indeed recommend the simplification of the EYFS (please see <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/a0076193/early-years-foundation-stage-to-be-radically-slimmed-down>. Last accessed June 6, 2011).

Despite this, it remains the case that for all students entering the workplace, but particularly for those with level 2 qualifications, their autonomy was likely to be further circumscribed by managers in individual settings. The working-class women with a low level of qualifications, receiving a low wage, who constitute the majority of the caring workforce has been caught within the grasp of a detailed programme of regulation and improvement designed to ameliorate their deficiencies. As a part of this, the reforms will "responsibilise" practitioners' sense of autonomy 'by delineating the "competence" of the professional employee, by instilling "professional-

like” norms and work ethics which govern not simply productive behaviour but more fundamentally employees’ subjectivities’ (Fournier 1999, 293). To summarise our argument to this point: the label of ‘professionalism’ and the source of its appeal rest on societal assumptions of the autonomy, discretion, status and self-regulation open to ‘professional’ occupational groups. However, the state’s promise of professionalism to ECEC workers is one rooted in a contemporary context of accountability and performativity, and is likely to have little impact on the workforce’s low status and low pay.

The ECEC workforce is expected not only to give children ‘a good start’, but to achieve predetermined assessable outcomes, [so] ‘practitioners are increasingly being told *what to do*, what works and what counts’ (Urban 2008, 139 original emphasis). For example, Labour policy documents stated that the EYFS ‘does not prescribe a particular approach or philosophy’ (DCSF 2009, 40). However, the method of assessing children’s progress is highly prescriptive. Currently the EYFS profile requires practitioners to plot 5-year olds against 13 assessment criteria over six areas of learning, and give them an overall score out of 117 points. This degree of prescription is criticised by some commentators, and as noted above, is a current area for review by the Coalition Government. Moss for example argues that in current policy,

Childcare is seen as an industry whose employees (as those in other industries) need to achieve industry-defined National Occupational Standards which are statements of skills, knowledge and understanding required in a particular industry and clearly define the criteria for assessing competent performance [...] Workers ... must demonstrate their ability to achieve a set of norms, so assuring their technical proficiency. This specification of how to work is matched by a highly prescriptive specifications of what to achieve set out in detailed curriculum guidance. (Moss 2006, 35/36)

The arguments of Urban, Osgood, Moss and other academics specialising in early years can be understood as resistance to the attempts to construct professionalism from outside and ‘above’ the occupational group (McClelland 1990, cited in Evetts 2003):

The hegemonic government professionalism discourse [in ECEC] effectively silences alternative debates about what it means to be professional, how professionalism might look and the dangers of unreflexively accepting and adhering to an externally imposed normalised construction of professionalism. (Osgood 2006, 6)

As a result of this ‘silencing’, practitioners respond to policy with ‘passive resistance’ or ‘feelings of powerlessness and fatalistic resignation’ (Osgood 2006). Practitioner ‘passivity’ is also mentioned by Moyles (2001, 87), and Cooke and Lawton (2008) talk of feelings of ‘powerlessness’. Practitioners are placed in a position of ‘ventriloquism’ (Morley 2003) where they speak and perform in accordance with an agenda not of their own making. Academics have endeavoured to offer an alternative construction of an ECEC professional from within (at least partially) the occupational group (e.g. Osgood’s ‘reflexive professional’, (2006, 2008), Urban (2008, 144) on the need for ‘reflective conversations’, and Moss (2006, 36) on ‘worker as researcher’).

We now turn to consider what the students and tutors in our study had to say about the courses they took, and their understandings of the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for caring for young children, their understanding, in other words, of the ‘recipe’ for a childcare practitioner (Zadoroznyj 2009).

Experiences on the course

We have three main points here, regarding students' and tutors' perceptions of the priorities for training a worker in ECEC. The first is the fundamental role of placements, rather than academic knowledge, in acquiring the correct 'vocational habitus', the second is the reshaping of knowledge into 'bite size' competencies, and the third is that ECEC knowledge is 'commonsense', born out of a naturalised ability to care.

The specialised or professional knowledge of childcare workers is rooted and expressed in practice

Carer knowledge is intuitive, contextualised and personalised. The students and tutors we spoke to did not emphasise, and indeed sometimes downplayed theoretical, abstract knowledge.⁵ Useful knowledge is local, specific and practical. 'Experience' is key. Both tutors and students emphasise the importance of practical experience and it is the main purpose of the childcare courses to provide opportunities for these experiences:

I liked how it is actually, like you know one day in college and the rest just practical like because you're getting more experience than writing like from books and stuff. (Naba, Westbrook NVQ level 2)

I don't think there's a course in this whole world, childcare course, that could teach you more than what you would learn once you're doing it. (Kathy, Westbrook, NVQ, level 3)

Clearly, the emphasis on practise in the 'real world' is one common to many occupations, not least the traditional professions of medicine and law. The difference here – and the differentiation is also applicable to some other forms of care work – is that ECEC experience is seen as something one can gain quite separately from the training, by caring for one's own or other's children informally. As noted above, caring for young children is commonly understood as an extension of mothering, reflecting the pervasiveness of what Moss describes as 'the maternalist gender regime' (2006, 37) (see also Apesora-Varano (2007) on mothering experience being seen as a resource in other caring occupations):

I think myself that I can do this much better than other job because I've got experience of my own children. I've got three children, so that's why I think it might be much easier for me, so I know I can do this. (Husna, Westbrook NVQ level 2)

'Theoretical' learning, e.g. theories of child development, centre on 'bite-sized' competencies

As noted above, abstract theoretical knowledge was seen as marginal to becoming a 'good' practitioner. Students valued learning about child development that had a clear and direct applicability, and some questioned the use of theorists as obscure and out of date:

I found them... I suppose it's because some of the theorists are so long ago that I think I probably find it difficult to think, 'And we still agree with that?' You know,

life has changed so much but yet I sit in a classroom and I'm told that somebody back in the 1800s said that we do it this way, this is the way to develop a child [...] So I find that a little bit difficult to grasp. (Sarah, Cedar Park, NVQ level 2)

Also, tutors tended to assume that the students would struggle if asked to deal with too much abstract knowledge,

Pam (Westbrook tutor): I think possibly the knowledge is less important than being able to carry out the job, but then you do need a certain amount of knowledge to be able to carry out the job effectively.

Int: And what sort of knowledge is that? ...Just using Vygotsky as an example, is it about Vygotsky...? [there are student-made posters explaining Vygotsky's zone of proximal development on the wall]

Pam: No, I think probably just generally about how children learn. [...] Yeah, you have to have an in-depth knowledge of child development.[...] Not so sure on the theories; theories are interesting but I wouldn't say it was a necessity. You have to have good awareness of health and safety, child protection.

Naturalised ability is another pervading message. Emphasis on experience and primacy of practical applicability locates childcare knowledge in the realm of 'commonsense' knowledge that comes 'naturally'

The apparently innate characteristics of a good carer mean that the academic, the intellectual is rejected. It is not necessary if good carers are born, rather than made.

I think a lot of the things they teach you, 'Oh, you need to know this and this about child development,' and a lot of it is just a very natural way and you're doing it very naturally. You'll do it naturally even without thinking, you're just – you're doing it because that's just something you do. (Johanna, level 2 diploma, Westbrook)

I don't feel I've learnt anything from [the course] [...] I think a lot of it is common sense. I kept thinking, why do I have to write this down when it is common sense to do it...I run exactly the same [as I did before starting the course]. Because I do everything we were taught to do really. No. Haven't changed anything [...] Perhaps I should have done. I don't know. I just go by what the parents say. (Elaine, NVQ level 3 student and childminder)

The students acknowledged the importance of knowing about legislation, current policies and guidelines. 'Looking at, like, policies, decisions that take place in a setting, learning the regulations and things like that'. (Jennifer, Cedar Park diploma level 3). This is what is understood as professional knowledge – knowledge that one would not have as a mum or as an untrained, uncertified carer.

Our argument here, therefore, is that if one of the major elements of professionalism is understood as using a specialist body of knowledge to make judgements, to exercise autonomy and discretion, then the students are being offered the status of a technician rather than that of a professional.

The embodiment of a 'good' carer

There has been some interest paid of late to the ways in which occupational identities are enacted and represented within 'professional' practice and identity (Waring

and Waring 2009, 348, Apesora-Varano 2007; Wolkowitz 2006; Trethewey 1999). The workers in the City of London, participating in Waring and Waring's study presented their idea of an embodied competent professional as someone who is healthy and fit and who tones, trains and controls their body. Waring and Waring argue that these workers understand there to be close relationship between the 'physical self' and the 'professional self'. Hence, it was important to 'look the part' and also, particularly in masculine and macho corporate environments to be known for competence in lifting weights, training and so on. The researchers conclude that,

The significance of the discourse of professionalism and its embodiment is that it resembles a form of occupational control and governmentality. Through internalizing and embodying symbolic values of professionalism via health related activities, City workers are further demonstrating their compliance and conformity to prevailing corporate expectations. This illustrates a form of control, not only in how employees work, but also in how they work on and represent their bodies. (Waring and Waring 2009, 362)

Waring and Waring's analysis applies both to men and women although they acknowledge that women are generally more subject to physical scrutiny and hence the need to control the body in order to present a professional self. Indeed, Trethewey focuses on 'the regimes of the body' (1999, 424) that lead women to focus on 'self-modification' (425). Her research with professional business women in the US argues that for her respondents the 'professional' body is fit and purposefully emits the correct messages. Incorrect messages can be read on bodies that are unfit, untoned, or excessively physical/sexual (e.g. the wearing of too tight or too revealing clothing, pregnant bodies or those that bear any sign of menstruation, and/or the appearance of uncontrolled emotion (Trethewey 1999). For Wolkowitz (2006) too, embodiment in the workplace reflects a set of classed and gendered conventions that include the ability and willingness to act upon and to scrutinise oneself and to accurately assess what kind of bodily presentation a particular situation requires.

In our research, the emphasis on the students modifying their appearance in order to attend college, placement and to become a respectable, responsible practitioner was one much discussed by tutors and students alike. As the following account shows, notions of respectability were highly gendered. It is worth noting that although the appearance of the three male students was also policed – they commented that they knew they could not, for instance, wear low-slung trousers – the interaction of class, gender and respectability has an additional dimension for the male students, and they all spoke of their concern of possible associations between male early years workers, homosexuality, and even paedophilia. Such homophobic stereotypes mark one way in which men are excluded from the ECEC workforce.

To return to the women students: the tutors and the course texts seek to 'quieten' various different aspects of the students' appearances and demeanour in an effort to construct a respectable learner. The young women's clothing is criticised for often being too sexual and too revealing. Clearly visible in these extracts are classed understandings of aesthetics (Tyler 2008), as tutors seek to limit what they perceive as the working-class young women's excess display of flesh:

I sent a student home, one of my school leavers home, and just her dress was entirely inappropriate. [...] And she said to me, yes, "Oh, I don't wear this in placement." I said, "Hold on a minute but what makes you think you can wear it here?" [] "It's

inappropriate. Your bottom's hanging out, your breasts are hanging out, you know, it's very inappropriate." (Grace, tutor, Westbrook)

It is something that we do emphasise that you will need to be professional, you cannot go in with your boobs and your bum showing, yeah? (Sue, tutor, Cedar Park):

A student came into the office with very short skirt on and she wasn't a particularly slim girl. Yeah, my colleague said, "You forgot to put your skirt on today." [] I've seen two young girls today with just their knickers on, or it looked like. (Pam, tutor, Westbrook)

The students are in settings both at college and on placement that are overwhelmingly female, and here we see that 'the gaze of female peers emerges as a [...] powerful disciplining force' (Trethewey 1999, 446).⁶ The students text books also give similar advice on appearance designed to encourage the young women to tone down any sign of excess; the CACHE level 2 book, advises, 'Keep make up to a minimum – the natural look is best and actually looks more grown up' (Tassoni 2007, 9).

The embodiment of the professionally constituted practitioner also extended to demeanour, and again, the importance of 'fitting in' with quiet and responsible behaviour. We conclude from conversations with students and tutors, that professionalism appeared to be understood in this context – not as an occupation-specific body of specialist knowledge and skills, but as a set of generic behaviours and attitudes designed to allow the workplace to function smoothly:

And to always make sure that you don't have a barrier to communication, if someone does want to talk to you make sure you do look professional and use the appropriate language to them rather than, you know, slang or whatever. . . . Make sure that you look smart, make sure your black polo top is tucked in; rather than standing with your arms crossed have them, like, by your side. (Amelie, Cedar Park diploma level 3)

Int: What do you think does it mean to be professional in your work?

Johanna (Westbrook, level 2 diploma): Well, you definitely need to show up on time, that's a very important thing, the punctuality. And you need to show respect to other workers, you don't need to be gossiping about people behind their backs [...] And just show respect and I would think that would basically be it.

So it's one of the things that we are constantly saying to them, it is important that they've got to be professional in their placements, they've got to be committed and be there [...] And so it is something- and you cannot go in, you know, with your phone going off, that kind of, sort of, developing maturity of what's expected in the workplace. (Sue, tutor Cedar Park)

So that's one of the things about appearance. And also their approach to people and manners and that sort of thing. And being very positive and not challenging and being a pain when they're there, you know, that sort of thing. Punctuality [] again and attendance and planning and that sort of thing. (Karen, tutor Westbrook)

The text books also reinforce these messages. From CACHE level 2, unit 6 'The professional standards of the practitioner':

A professional is someone who is competent, qualified and focused on their work. They have professional standards which they maintain. They take satisfaction in the work they have done and while praise is welcomed, they do not expect or look for it.

A professional does not watch the clock or cut corners in order to get home early or on time. A professional understands that sometimes extra time has to be spent in order for the work to be completed. [...] Another aspect of being a professional is the ability to prevent your personal life from creeping into your work. This means that even if you are worried about a friend or have had an argument, it does not show in your work or behaviour.' (Tassoni 2007, 209)

Indeed on occasion, the text appears to expect very little in the way of existing social skills, and the section on interpersonal skills instructs students on how to get someone's attention:

Respectfulness and thoughtfulness:

It is important to show respect and thoughtfulness when working with others. For example, you might need to talk to a colleague but see that they are busy. You should wait a few minutes before interrupting them. If it's urgent, apologise for the interruption by saying something like: 'I'm really sorry to interrupt you, but Michael's mother is on the phone and it seems fairly urgent'. (Tassoni 2007, 211)

Interestingly, given this degree of micro-management of behaviour, the text books have little to say about dealing with any difficult emotions which might be engendered in practitioners by an encounter with an angry or distressed parent or child. The CACHE texts assume a degree of emotional labour 'where individuals change or manage emotions to make them appropriate or consistent with a situation, a role, or an expected organisational behaviour' (Mumby and Putnam 1992, 472). Hochschild's well-known critique of emotional labour emphasises the constraints placed upon the self-presentation of employees, especially women, by employers. She argued that in service industries, women's emotional labour, as they worked to maintain a cheerful, polite and calm front towards clients, was being expended for the goal of corporate profit. However, the moral parameters and weight of ECEC demand such self management for a different goal; the rationale being that young children require a care setting governed by an even emotional tone. Difficult emotions are therefore absented from a common sense understanding of childcare. The students understood the 'right person for the job' as someone possessing highly gendered characteristics, stripped of any dangerous or negative inferences. Thus, the 'good' childcare worker was warm, 'bubbly', and responsive (also Miller 2008). Successful students worked hard to conform to idealised versions of the consistently 'smiley', patient and calm practitioner, thereby embarking on a creative project of the self (for more detail on emotional labour, see Vincent and Braun 2011, also Colley 2006). Thus, the performance of gender which is valued and validated by childcare texts and tutors is one of a wholesome, mature, responsible carer, free from any excesses whether they be of behaviour or appearance; "'competent" femininity' in other words (Evans 2009, 347).

Conclusion

We conclude that the version of professionalism offered to the students, and contributing to their acquisition of vocational habitus is highly constrained. At this level of training, tutors and course texts emphasise practical competencies, the adoption of government guidelines, and the regulation of students' appearance and behaviour. Apesora-Varano (2007) outlines the way in which nurse training also

emphasises managing behaviour and image. Given the explicitness of the homilies directed at students concerning how they should dress, talk and behave, we would agree with Apesora-Varano's suggestion that the students, being young and working-class, are understood as lacking forms of cultural capital which would automatically ensure they behaved 'professionally' and thereby attain respectability. 'As Bourdieu notes, the body is the most indisputable materialization of class tastes. . . . A respectable body is White, desexualised, hetero-feminine and usually middle class'.

The students are being moulded to 'fit in' to a workforce which in itself appears to have little autonomy to shape or influence the direction of the workload. Surrounded by prescription, the students appear to have little room in which to engage in reflexive practice. Moss (2008) argues that the ECEC workforce is divided between those working in 'childcare' with poor conditions, pay and status and those in schools with relatively better circumstances. He argues for integration to improve conditions, status and provision for all ECEC staff and children. It seems to us that there is a significant danger that the latest reforms will allow or increase the development of a further division in the workforce, split between those who have degree-level qualifications, such as EYPS, and those who have been trained to a much lower level. Despite the somewhat promiscuous use of the word 'professional' in Labour government documents to refer to the ECEC workforce as a whole, the label most firmly and most frequently adheres to those, as the EYPS name suggests, with a degree ('Every part of the workforce will have strong professional leadership which is committed to excellence', DFES 2005, 19). What then is the possible future for the students we encountered? The last Labour government made laudable promises concerning the necessity of opportunities for CPD, allowing workers to improve their qualifications, but as Jayne Osgood (2008) has argued, part-time study is difficult for those who work long hours, many of whom have also significant domestic responsibilities. Also, our students had in many cases, 'fragile learner identities' which may not easily accept further academic study as suitable for them (see Vincent and Braun 2010). The risk is that they will remain working in poorly paid jobs that may offer them considerable emotional satisfaction (and strain), but also little room for the exercise of autonomy or professional judgment. Whether this situation changes for the better under the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition remains to be seen.

Postscript

The Coalition Government continue to fund, for 2011/12, two graduate programmes, EYPS and New Leaders. The latter is a relatively new two year programme that leads to an EYPS and a master's degree in Early Years and is designed to bring in graduates from outside the profession to lead early years settings. The Tickell Review 2011 also recommended moving towards level 3 qualifications as a baseline for the profession and having an ambition of all graduate-led settings.

Notes

1. Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to GCSE grades at A*-C, level 3 qualifications are equivalent to A-level.

2. Two out of nine partners were in NS-SEC 2, and the other 7 in NS-SEC 4 or below, maintaining the working-class identity of the majority of the sample.
3. It is worth noting that the meaning of 'good quality' in ECEC is contested (see e.g. Moss 2008)
4. Workers in ECEC do not have a clear professional regulatory body, and are thereby lacking another key feature of a profession (Urban 2008, 140; Moyles 2001, 86). The Labour Government was considering whether one should be established before their defeat in the 2010 election (DCFS 2009).
5. Jayne Osgood asserts in her research that staff grew to appreciate more theoretical/pedagogical knowledge as they accumulated experience. It may be that the students' emphasis on practical experience and 'commonsense' knowledge might therefore be bound up with their age and inexperience.
6. It should be noted that 'peers', Tretheway's word, does not quite fit here, as it was women tutors and managers who provided the disciplining gaze.

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