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Victoria Bamsey & Lewis Fogarty

To cite this article: Victoria Bamsey & Lewis Fogarty (19 Nov 2025): 'We are teachers too': reclaiming professionalism in early childhood education from within, Early Years, DOI: [10.1080/09575146.2025.2580480](https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2025.2580480)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2025.2580480>



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Published online: 19 Nov 2025.



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'We are teachers too': reclaiming professionalism in early childhood education from within

Victoria Bamsey ^a and Lewis Fogarty ^b

^aFaculty of Arts, Humanities and Business, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK; ^bCollege of Arts, Law and Social Sciences, Brunel University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The professionalisation of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has gained international prominence due to its role in fostering children's lifelong learning and contributing to societal economic growth. This paper explores professionalism in the ECEC workforce in England, focusing on tensions between policy, qualifications and the experiences of early years educators. Drawing on critical pedagogy and Bernstein's pedagogic device, we explore how power dynamics and inequalities have led to the de-professionalisation of early years educators, positioning them as subordinate to teachers in compulsory education. Through narrative inquiry with 15 participants, we highlight the challenges and opportunities for early years educators to reclaim agency, foster criticality and transform their professionalism. The findings highlight a need to re-conceptualise ECEC professionalism, to prioritise practitioner autonomy, equitable policies and develop an integrated approach to workforce development through a sector-wide commitment to change that empowers early years educators as agents of pedagogic and policy innovation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 February 2025

Accepted 20 October 2025

KEYWORDS

Early years educator;
professionalism; freire;
critical pedagogy; bernstein

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has gained prominence among policymakers internationally, with an understanding that a high-quality early years experience will provide a strong foundation for a child's future lifelong learning, employment, and the economic growth of a country (Moss 2006; OECD 2020). Yet despite decades of reform in England, early years educators continue to be positioned more as technicians than as professionals, with limited recognition of their expertise, autonomy, or agency. Persistent issues of low pay, high turnover, and contested status reflect systemic de-professionalisation rather than shortcomings of the workforce itself (Moss 2006; Urban et al. 2012). Understanding how professionalism is constructed, constrained and reimagined is therefore critical to the future of the sector.

CONTACT Victoria Bamsey  victoria.bamsey@plymouth.ac.uk  Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, Devon PL4 8AA, UK

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A substantial body of research has highlighted the undervaluation of the early years workforce and the fragility of its professional identity. Policy reviews such as Nutbrown (2012) and Tickell (2011) have drawn attention to the low status and inconsistent qualification requirements of practitioners. Scholars including Moss (2006) and Arndt et al. (2018) have shown how even terminology (practitioner, worker, professional), shapes and reflects these contested positions. Policy reforms have repeatedly sought to raise quality and status, but as Vincent and Braun (2011) argue, such reforms often play out unevenly in practice, with educators positioned as implementers rather than co-constructors of professionalism. While international organisations such as the OECD (2020) and UNICEF (2024) consistently stress the importance of highly skilled early years staff, in England policy interventions have often produced fragmented reforms with limited impact. Despite aspirations for graduate leadership and parity with teachers, the workforce remains characterised by low qualification thresholds, pay inequities, and high levels of attrition.

This paper asks how professionalism in ECEC is produced, contested, and potentially reclaimed from within the workforce itself. We argue that de-professionalisation in the early years cannot be explained solely through policy analysis or workforce statistics but must be understood as both an ideological and structural process. To illuminate this, we bring together Paulo Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy and Basil Bernstein's (1996) theory of the pedagogic device. Freire's critique of the 'banking model' of education highlights how educators, like learners, can be positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, silenced within systems that deny their agency. Bernstein's pedagogic device shows how official knowledge is produced, distributed, and recontextualised through policy, exposing the structural mechanisms by which the state defines and regulates professionalism. Together, these lenses allow us to examine both the symbolic and material processes of de-professionalisation, as well as the spaces for resistance and transformation.

At the same time, there is a need to situate theoretical critique within lived professional realities. While previous scholarship has mapped the policy context and problematised the sector's marginal status, less attention has been paid to how early years educators themselves conceptualise professionalism and respond to the pressures of de-professionalisation. Narrative inquiry offers a way of foregrounding these voices, capturing how practitioners interpret, negotiate, and sometimes subvert official constructions of their role. In doing so, we can better understand not only the constraints imposed by the official recontextualising field (ORF), but also the possibilities for professional identity and agency within the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) (Bernstein 1996).

The contribution of this paper is therefore twofold. Conceptually, it combines Freire and Bernstein's ideas to develop a dual lens for analysing professionalism in ECEC, highlighting how ideological positioning and structural control intersect in the reproduction of workforce inequalities. Empirically, it draws on narrative accounts from early years educators in England to show how professionalism is experienced, contested and redefined in practice. By bringing theory and lived experience into dialogue, the paper reframes debates on early years professionalism around both the mechanisms of de-professionalisation and the capacities for agency and transformation.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first review the contested concept of professionalism in ECEC and outline our theoretical framing drawing on Freire and Bernstein. We then

examine the policy shifts that have shaped the ORF in England and explore how professionalism can be recontextualised within the PRF. After outlining our narrative inquiry methodology, we present empirical findings from educators' accounts and analyse them through our conceptual lens. We conclude by discussing the implications for reclaiming professionalism in ECEC and for reshaping debates on the role and recognition of the workforce.

Theoretical framing

Professionalism in ECEC is best understood not only as a matter of policy or qualifications, but as the outcome of deeper ideological and structural forces. To examine these, we bring together Paulo Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy and Basil Bernstein's (1996) theory of the pedagogic device. Each illuminates different aspects of how professionalism is constructed, constrained and potentially reclaimed. Freire highlights the ideological positioning of educators, while Bernstein's ideas highlight the structural processes through which knowledge is produced and regulated. Together, these perspectives provide a dual lens for analysing de-professionalisation and exploring possibilities for transformation.

Freire: ideology and the silencing of educators

Freire's critique of the 'banking model' of education is well known, learners are treated as empty vessels into which knowledge is deposited, denying them agency or critical capacity (Freire 2005). Applied to the early years workforce, this critique extends to educators themselves. Educators are frequently positioned as passive implementers of curricula, required to comply with prescriptive frameworks rather than exercise professional judgement. Freire's (2005, 30) notion of a 'culture of silence' captures this marginalisation where educators' voices are systematically excluded from shaping their own professional identity and practice.

This silencing is not neutral, it reflects wider ideological processes in which certain forms of knowledge are legitimised and others devalued. For early years educators, caring, relational, and ethical forms of knowledge are often dismissed as 'soft skills', while technical competences tied to measurable outcomes are elevated. Freire's (2005) emphasis on critical consciousness and collective action is therefore instructive; reclaiming professionalism requires practitioners to move beyond compliance and to articulate their role as active agents in shaping pedagogy and policy.

Bernstein: structure, control and the pedagogic device

Where Freire's ideas expose ideology, Bernstein provides a framework for understanding how structural control is exercised through education systems. His theory of the pedagogic device describes how knowledge is produced, recontextualised, and reproduced across different fields (Bernstein 1996, 2003). In this model, the field of production generates new knowledge; the official recontextualising field (ORF) translates selected knowledge into policy and curriculum; and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) further adapts it within institutions and practice.

Figure 1 illustrates these relationships. It highlights how official discourse is contextualised in the ORF, and then recontextualised within the PRF where practitioners attempt to apply and interpret it in everyday contexts. The figure below makes clear that this process is not linear but contested, with struggles over control shaping what counts as legitimate professional knowledge. The ‘discursive gap’ between the ORF and PRF is particularly significant: while it offers space for innovation and resistance, it is also the site where policy actors seek to impose control.

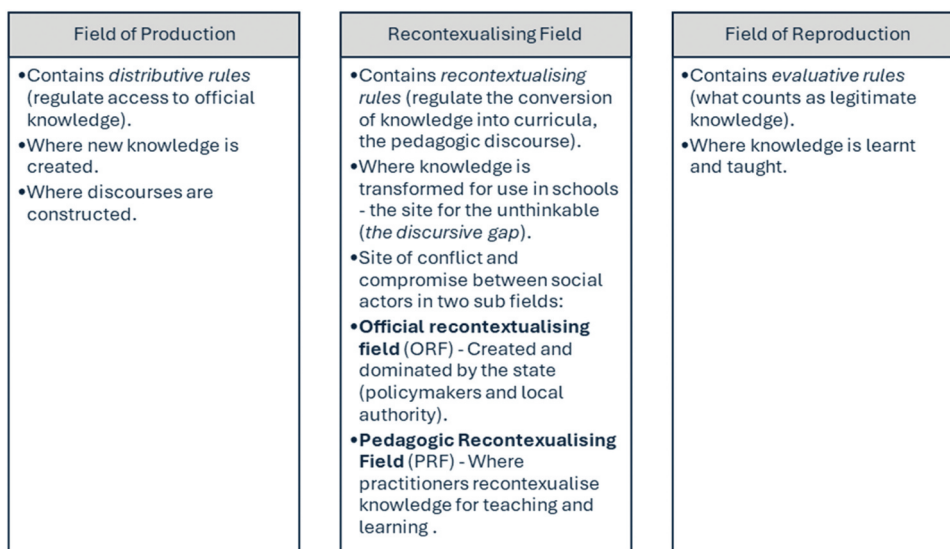


Figure 1. Bernstein's pedagogic device.

For ECEC, this framework helps us to understand how policymakers define ‘official knowledge’ through qualification standards and curricula, which are then distributed to practitioners with limited scope for reinterpretation. The Early Years Educator qualification (DfE 2024a) for example, codifies professional knowledge in terms of prescriptive ‘learn that’ and ‘learn how to’ statements, leaving little space for practitioners’ professional judgement or ethical reflection. The PRF becomes a site of constrained agency: while practitioners interpret and adapt policy, their scope is tightly bounded by the regulatory requirements of the ORF.

A combined lens: ideology and structure in de-professionalisation

Bringing Freire and Bernstein's ideas together allows us to analyse de-professionalisation as both ideological and structural. Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy explains how educators are discursively positioned as subordinate; their voices muted within a culture of silence. Bernstein's (1996) pedagogic device shows how this positioning is institutionalised through policy mechanisms that

regulate professional knowledge and constrain practice. Together, they reveal the interdependence of ideology and structure: professional identity is shaped not only by discourse but also by the material organisation of qualifications, curricula, and regulatory systems.

At the same time, both frameworks illuminate possibilities for transformation. Freire (2005) emphasises the potential of critical awareness and collective action to disrupt silence. Bernstein (1996) identifies the discursive gap as a space where educators can recontextualise knowledge and assert professional agency. In ECEC, these insights suggest that while de-professionalisation is deeply embedded, it is neither inevitable nor totalising. Educators retain the capacity to negotiate, resist, and reimagine professionalism from within the PRF.

Positioning this study

This theoretical framing underpins the analysis that follows. By applying Freire and Bernstein's ideas to the narratives of early years educators, we interrogate how professionalism is experienced at the intersection of ideology and structure. We ask: how do educators describe their professional identity in a policy context that restricts their agency? How do they navigate the tensions between official constructions of knowledge and their own lived understandings of practice? And where, if at all, do they find spaces to resist or reframe professionalism?

In addressing these questions, the study extends existing debates in two ways. Conceptually, it demonstrates the value of combining Freire and Bernstein's theorisations to capture both symbolic and material dimensions of de-professionalisation. Empirically, it foregrounds practitioner voices, showing how educators themselves negotiate these dynamics within the PRF. This dual focus enables a richer account of professionalism in ECEC, one that recognises the constraints imposed by policy but also the potential for agency and transformation.

Policy shifts: the evolution of the ORF in England

The expectations for and of the early years workforce in England are shaped by a complex history of legislation addressing the role, status, and qualification requirements of educators. Viewed through Bernstein's pedagogic device, this history demonstrates repeated *struggles for control* within the ORF, where policymakers determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is authorised to hold it (Barrett 2024; Bernstein 1996, 2003).

Until the early 2000s, qualifications for those working with children under five outside of schools and maintained nurseries were largely unregulated. The introduction of the National Standards for Under 8s Day Care and Childminding (DfES 2003) established for the first time minimum requirements: level 3 for supervisors and level 2 for at least half of other staff. Ambitions to professionalise the workforce gathered pace with the 2007 Children's Plan, which proposed that every setting be led by a graduate by 2015. However, this aspiration was not legislated, and the creation of

Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) in 2008 failed to achieve parity with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) (Urban 2010).

In 2008, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (DCSF 2008) replaced the National Standards, unifying provision across childminding and group settings. Yet concerns raised as early as the Rumbold Report (DoES 1990) persisted, and were echoed in the Tickell (2011) and Nutbrown (2012, 2013) reviews: inconsistent qualification frameworks, limited status, and unclear career progression. More recently, the Early Years Educator qualification (DfE 2024a) sought to standardise training by requiring English and maths competence, but the launch of Early Years Teacher Status in 2015 once again stopped short of parity with schoolteachers.

Here, Bernstein's notion of *official knowledge* is instructive. Professional knowledge in ECEC has been constructed within the field of production and relocated to the workforce through approved qualification frameworks, tightly controlled by the ORF (Bernstein 1996). This centralisation leaves little room for recontextualisation within the PRF. The Childcare Act 2006 continues to underpin the current EYFS (DfE 2024b), requiring a level 3 qualification for leaders and a minimum of 50% of staff at level 2. Recent policy moves, such as separating childminding from group-based provision, represent a reversal of earlier efforts to unify the sector. In Bernstein's terms, such fragmentation weakens the position of the practitioner recontextualising field (PRF) by reducing its coherence and collective authority, thereby reinforcing the dominance of the official recontextualising field (ORF) and constraining the discursive gap through which practitioner perspectives might otherwise shape professional knowledge.

Taken together, these policy shifts reveal how the ORF in England has repeatedly constructed professionalism in narrow technocratic terms. Far from elevating the workforce, the state has consistently reproduced a hierarchy where early years educators remain marginalised, constrained within what Bernstein (1996) terms a field of *appropriation, conflict, and control*. The outcome is a professional identity continually destabilised by reform and a workforce crisis shaped by systemic de-professionalisation (Moss 2010; Urban et al. 2012).

Recontextualising professionalism in the PRF

While policy interventions in the ORF define official knowledge, professionalism is also reinterpreted and contested within the PRF, where educators, leaders, and researchers negotiate meanings in practice. Internationally, there is consensus that highly qualified staff are central to quality ECEC (Moss 2006; OECD 2020; UNICEF 2024). Across Europe, most countries require degree-level qualifications for core practitioners (Ofsted 2023). Yet despite this emphasis, many nations face workforce crises linked to low pay, poor conditions and recruitment challenges (Moss 2010; Urban et al. 2012). In England, these pressures are amplified by low qualification thresholds and the expansion of funded places, creating intense strain on the sector.

In this contested PRF, definitions of professionalism are far from settled. Professionalism is typically associated with autonomy, agency and control over a unique knowledge base (Bradbury 2019), but in practice early years educators in England experience a neo-liberal regime of compliance and regulation that limits opportunities for criticality or professional growth (Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Moss 2010). The contrast with teachers is stark: teacher standards (DfE 2021) encompass subject knowledge, critical reflection, and relational professionalism, whereas early years standards reduce practice to a technocratic level of knowledge and skill.

Campbell-Barr's (2019a) conceptualisation of *professional knowledges* deepens this analysis. Drawing on Aristotle, she identifies three forms: *episteme* (theoretical knowledge), *techne* (technical skill) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Policy frameworks in England privilege the first two, while sidelining *phronesis*—the situated, ethical judgement that underpins relational practice in ECEC. This imbalance weakens professional agency and leaves educators struggling to articulate their professional identity in ways that extend beyond compliance. Here, Freire's (2005) concept of a *culture of silence* resonates powerfully. In a system where practitioners' voices are marginalised, professional confidence is undermined and opportunities for critical awareness are curtailed. Freire warns that such silencing can only be overcome through collective action: educators must work together to subvert hegemonic constructions of their role and reclaim agency. In the ECEC context, this points towards a paradigm of professional liberation, where practitioners advocate for recognition and contribute to shaping the discourse of professionalism itself (Fogarty 2022).

Professionalising ECEC is therefore not a linear process of raising qualifications, but an ongoing negotiation that requires time, reflection, and dialogue about what it means to be a professional (Campbell-Barr 2018). This study enters that conversation by foregrounding educators' own conceptualisations of professionalism. In doing so, it challenges the hegemonic power of the state and positions the PRF as a site of potential transformation, where practitioner voices contest and reframe official definitions of knowledge and professionalism.

Methodology

As educational researchers, we sought to explore how professionalism in the ECEC sector is conceptualised and enacted. Specifically, we examined how early years educators in the PRF recontextualise their knowledge of early learning and child development into practice and how the state (the ORF, represented by legislation, local authorities, and bodies such as Ofsted (England's regulator of education)) creates conflict and compromise between ECEC ideals and practical enactment.

The participants listed in Table 1 below were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling leading to an experience-centred narrative research strategy which enabled fifteen participants to share their experiences through storytelling, facilitated by lengthy audio-recorded semi-structured interviews which encouraged reflection and internal representation. This approach prioritised participant voice and created 'transitional' spaces where the situated knowledge of both researcher and participants fostered trust and cooperation (Mullings 1999).

Table 1. Demographic overview of participants.

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Provision	Length of service in sector	Qualification level	Role
Shelly	F	40–50	Childminder	10–20 yrs	6	Manager/owner
Audrey	F	50–60	Consultant	20 yrs +	6	Consultant
Whitney	F	40–50	Independent School	20 yrs +	7	Teacher
Mandy	F	30–40	Large Private	4 yrs	5	Teacher
Mark	M	50–60	Large Private	10–20 yrs	6	Owner
Evelyn	F	40–50	Nursery School	20 yrs +	6	Headteacher
Evie	F	20–30	Small Private	3 yrs	Unqualified	Deputy Manager
Margaret	F	40–50	Small Private	20 yrs +	7	Manager/owner
Niyati	F	30–40	Small Private	10–20 yrs	6	Manager/owner
Sally	F	40–50	Small Private	20 yrs +	4	Senior leader
Shaima	F	30–40	Small Private	10–20 yrs	6	Room leader
Tammy	F	20–30	Small Private	5–10 yrs	6	Room leader
Tulip	F	20–30	Small Private	2 yrs	3	Teacher
Bernice	F	20–30	State School	5–10 yrs	4	Teaching assistant
Kelly	F	30–40	Voluntary pre-school	20 yrs +	3	Deputy Manager

Ethical tensions are inherent in research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), particularly within the majority-female ECEC workforce, which struggles to find a voice in policy development (Tesar et al. 2017). Procedural ethics ensured participants' protection, autonomy and privacy while promoting equitable treatment (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). While the authors report there are no competing interests to declare, the researcher, a male academic and nursery owner, held an 'insider-outsider' position (Gair 2012), embedded in the sector yet limited by his perspective. Given the gendered nature of ECEC, adopting research in a feminised field compelled the researcher to significantly theorise his reflexivity on a personal level, epistemologically and ethically (Scacchi 2023). He acknowledged that the act of knowing was affected by both the social conditions under which the research was conducted and their relationship within the research context (Mann and Kelley 1997).

A process of inductive thematic analysis was used to identify initial patterns within the data, ensuring rigour, trustworthiness and credibility (Braun and Clarke 2006), while our theoretical framing has been used as a lens for later interpretation. After the interviews and initial thematic analysis, participants were invited to add further comments on the key themes identified. This approach provided valuable insights into participants' perspectives, 'highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights' (Nowell et al. 2017, 2), whilst also ensuring trustworthiness in the research findings (Lincoln and Guba 2013).

Findings – the tension between policy and practice

The aim of this paper was to consider how we can transform professionalism within the early years by questioning the production of knowledge and

positioning of early years educators through a process of ‘knowledge-building’ between practitioners and research (Barrett 2024, 3). The participants in this study were mostly mature (over the age of 20), with several years’ experience in ECEC and the majority were qualified to degree or masters level. This is unusual for a sector where the qualification requirement for setting leaders is only level three but emphasises a desire for these early years educators to professionalise themselves and their settings through a higher-level qualification.

Our inductive process of analysis highlighted several elements related to professionalism that were important for these practitioners as set out in Figure 2:

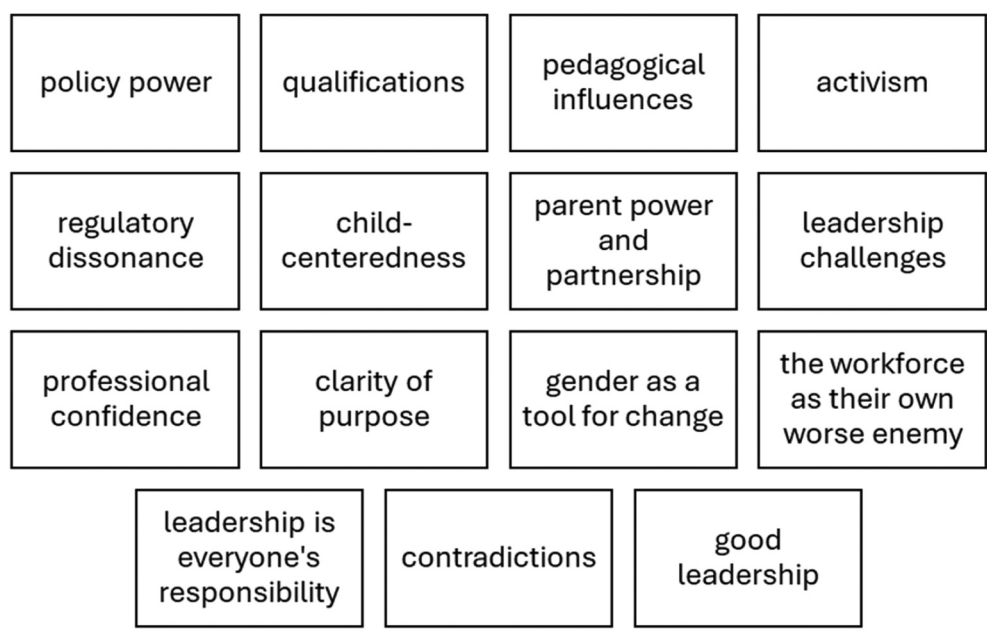


Figure 2. Factors related to professionalism in ECEC.

Of note is how these perceived factors related to professionalism in ECEC reflected more than the ‘professional knowledges’ of *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis* (Campbell-Barr 2019a, 136), to step beyond the individual and also consider the nursery and sector positioning of professionalism. When analysed through the lens of critical pedagogy and Bernstein’s pedagogic device patterns can be seen that emphasise a concern for oppression within ECEC through the positioning of early years educators as technicians (Ball 2003) with a role to make children ready for the next stage in their education, verses a liberated workforce of intellectuals who hold the child’s interests and needs at the centre of their practice as demonstrated in Table 2:

Table 2. Thematic review of the elements of professionalism.

From Oppression to Liberation	Moving from Technician to Intellectual	From Banking Knowledge to Child Centredness
• Policy power (17 from 11) • Regulatory dissonance (14 from 9) • the workforce as their own worse enemy (59 from 12) • professional confidence (47 from 14) • activism (9 mentions) • gender as a tool for change (17 from 9)	• qualifications (29 from 13) • pedagogical influences (37 from 15) • leadership is everyone's responsibility (27 from 11) • leadership challenges (20 from 12) • contradictions (10 mentions)	• child centeredness (46 from 13) • parent power and partnership (25 from 12) • clarity of purpose (21 from 7) • good leadership (46 from 13)

(The brackets denote the proportion of mentions to participants, e.g. 17 mentions from 11 participants).

These key themes related to professionalism were important to our participants, situated as they were within a sector so constrained by policy frameworks. Issues of politics and power shaped how professionalism in the early years was conceptualised by these early years educators, and provided insight into their enacted professionalisms, pedagogy and practice (Gramsci 2014).

From oppression to liberation

Across the dataset, participants expressed ongoing frustration with top-down policy structures that constrained their professional autonomy and required them to navigate systemic constraints by 'challenging things daily' (Evie) to actively reclaim their identity and agency. Central to this struggle was the pervasive influence of *policy power*, where top-down mandates have shaped practice without practitioner input. Participants described a sense of alienation from the decision-making processes, with Evie noting that policies are made by 'somebody sitting high up in an office', disconnected from the realities of early years settings. This reflected a broader issue of *regulatory dissonance*, where imposed standards conflicted with the values and lived experiences of educators. This dissonance was not merely bureaucratic, it was deeply personal and professional with practitioners experiencing a tension between compliance and authenticity, often forced to navigate policies that undermined their autonomy and expertise.

Economic constraints have further exacerbated these challenges as expressed by Niyati in her statement: 'The sector is just underfunded. It's because the government doesn't respect them'. Chronic underfunding and low pay have forced educators to choose between passion and financial security, contributing to high attrition rates and a sense of professional devaluation (Nutbrown 2021). Yet, despite these pressures, participants remained committed to their roles, driven by a deep sense of purpose and a belief in the transformative power of education. As Freire (2005) argued, transformation arises through

praxis, the interplay of reflection and action. Participants engaged in this praxis by challenging the status quo, reinterpreting policy through reflective practice, and asserting their professional judgment. Critical reflection became a tool for empowerment (Vandenbroeck 2021) and speaking out was not simply about inclusion but an act of resistance, of reclaiming professionalism through reflection, critique and action.

However, the sector also faces internal challenges. While few disputed the value of training, several participants highlighted how *the workforce can be its own worst enemy*, particularly when qualifications were treated as endpoints rather than a foundation for a future career. Tammy noted that while they ‘are important ... I think experience is just as much important’, while Evelyn warned, ‘I don’t think having a qualification [on its own] makes you an expert ... the quality isn’t as good now’. These concerns were sharpened by observations about fast-tracked training routes:

Ten years ago, training companies [were] just putting people through ... they’ve got their level three but actually, they don’t understand what that level three is. (Niyati)

Fast-tracked training and superficial engagement with CPD were seen to be diluting professional standards, undermining collective credibility while internal fragmentation reinforced external narratives of early years educators as low-skilled and undervalued. In a move to challenge this status quo, many of these educators took professional development into their own hands, asserting their *professional confidence* through continuous professional development and a commitment to reflective practice as Shelley and Whitney emphasise:

For me, anything I want to know [my qualification] is not going to hold me back. I will research and be as up to date as a teacher. (Shelley)

If individuals are not willing to engage meaningfully in CPD, then I do not think they have a place being a teacher. (Whitney)

They rejected the notion that qualifications alone confer expertise, instead embracing a dynamic professionalism rooted in lived experience and critical inquiry (Campbell-Barr 2019b). This confidence fuelled *activism*, a ‘revolutionary process’ (Freire 2005, 127) with participants engaging in advocacy, public discourse, and protest to challenge marginalisation and demand recognition. As Niyati stated, ‘you can either complain and do nothing, or get on with it and make your mark’. Mark went further to say that ‘we want to encourage people to speak up’, and Evelyn went on a march every year ‘to make our voices heard because we are in the forgotten sector’.

Identity and gender emerged as a significant, though often implicit, *tool for change*. The feminised nature of the ECEC workforce, historically linked to care and undervaluation, is both a site of oppression and a source of strength (Scacchi 2023). Participants challenged derogatory labels such as ‘childminder’ and asserted parity with teachers across educational phases. In doing so, they reframed gendered assumptions, using their identity and experience to advocate for equity and professional respect.

This journey from oppression to liberation has been marked by resistance, reflection, and redefinition (Freire 2005). These early years educators were not passive recipients of policy but active agents of change. Through their collective voice, critical engagement, and professional solidarity, these participants have rejected their framing as passive

technicians of education. Instead, they have enacted agency, redefined their roles, and reimagined professionalism as something lived, not bestowed, reshaping the narrative of their profession and moving from marginalisation to empowerment.

From technician to intellectual

The transition from technician to intellectual reflects a profound reimagining of professional identity within early years education. Participants in this study described a shift from procedural compliance to critical engagement, catalysed by formal study and *qualifications*. Tammy's reflection, 'I started to question why we do things a certain way', illustrates how academic learning fosters critical reflection, enabling practitioners to interrogate inherited practices and assumptions.

Importantly, qualifications were not seen as ends in themselves but as tools for pedagogical identity formation. Shelley's comment that 'the theory side helped me make sense of what I already believed', demonstrates how *pedagogical influences* and theoretical frameworks provide language and legitimacy to long-held instincts. This synthesis of experience and theory had built pedagogical confidence for these educators, enabling them to articulate and defend their practice with intellectual rigour.

Leadership emerged as a key theme in this transformation, framed not by hierarchy but by *distributed responsibility*. Evie's assertion that 'you don't need a title to lead' reflects a shift toward distributed leadership, where influence is enacted through collaboration, dialogue, and everyday interactions (Heikka and Hujala 2008). This model challenges traditional notions of leadership as positional, instead recognising the value of informal leadership in shaping practice and culture.

However, participants also identified contradictions and *challenges* within this leadership landscape. Shaima noted the difficulty of initiating change without formal authority, while Whitney highlighted structural inconsistencies: 'We're told to focus on development, but then we're given hardly any time to reflect'. These tensions reveal *contradictions*, a disconnect between policy rhetoric in the ORF and workplace realities in the PRF, where aspirations for reflective leadership are undermined by systemic constraints (Bernstein 1996).

Ultimately, the movement from technician to intellectual represents a redefinition of professionalism. Educators are no longer passive implementers of policy but active constructors of meaning and practice. Through qualifications, critical reflection, and collaborative leadership, they are reshaping the early years sector, asserting that professionalism is not bestowed, but lived, negotiated, and intellectually grounded.

From banking knowledge to child-centredness

The shift from a compliance-based model of education to a child-centred approach marks a significant transformation in early years professionalism. Participants described moving away from the 'banking model' of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners, toward a pedagogy grounded in dialogue, reflection, and relational practice; it aligns with Freire's (2005) critique of traditional education and his call for co-constructed learning rooted in mutual respect and agency.

Central to this transformation was the emergence of *child-centeredness* as a unifying professional value. Participants consistently framed their practice around the needs,

interests, and developmental stages of children. Shaima's comment, 'everything we do is based on [the children's] learning needs', illustrates how pedagogical decisions are increasingly informed by observation and responsiveness rather than rigid instruction. Audrey's emphasis on 'learning from the child, with the child' reflects a relational pedagogy that prioritises emotional connection and professional love, where early years practice is 'child centred' (Mark), and learning is guided by connection rather than compliance (Male and Palaiologou 2012). This clarity of purpose also extended to *parent power and partnership*. Participants challenged reductive views of parental involvement, instead advocating for collaborative relationships that support children's learning. Such partnerships reinforce a child-centred ethos in practice and position educators as facilitators of shared understanding and care.

Good leadership was another key element to this theme, redefined as a collective responsibility rather than a positional role; however, participants also identified contradictions within this leadership landscape. Whitney noted the paradox of being encouraged to focus on development while being denied time for reflection, a tension echoed in Heikka and Hujala's (2008) warning that pedagogical leadership cannot flourish without systemic support. Some participants questioned the priorities of formal leaders, asking, 'if leaders are not focusing on the children, then what are they focusing on?' (Audrey). This critique underscores the need for good leadership, leadership that is ethically grounded, child-focused, and aligned with the values of the profession. This movement from banking knowledge to child-centeredness represents a reclaiming of professional purpose. Through critical reflection, relational practice, and inclusive leadership, early years educators are reshaping their roles, not as technicians, but as intellectuals committed to the holistic development of children.

These findings illustrate how early years educators are not passive recipients of policy but active, thinking professionals. They resist reductive frameworks, centre the child, assert their status as educators, and claim leadership in ways that challenge traditional hierarchies. In doing so, they carve out a new professional identity rooted in *praxis*: critical reflection, collective purpose, and relational pedagogy (Freire 2005). The following discussion examines how these daily acts of courage and care do more than resist, they build an alternative professional narrative, one grounded in agency, not acceptance.

Transforming professionalism

At the start of this paper, we posed the question, '*how can we transform professionalism in the early years?*' This is an important consideration because while the notion of early years professionalism has been a topic of debate for some time, we are still unable to instigate change in England at a national level leaving many early years educators feeling undervalued, and a workforce in crisis as skilled practitioners are leaving the sector altogether (Nutbrown 2021). With a concern for the future of ECEC we have questioned the production of knowledge and how early years educators have been positioned as technicians (as transmitters of information), rather than organic intellectuals capable of transforming children's worlds.

Drawing on Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy and Bernstein's (1996) pedagogic device, we have explored how educators can move from passive compliance to

active engagement with policy and pedagogy by exploiting the discursive gap between the ORF and the PRF. A covert resistance to the status quo can be seen, where early years educators are reclaiming autonomy, agency and control, challenging the assumed rhetoric, questioning practice, and positioning children and their families and the centre of their work.

Transforming professionalism in ECEC requires a radical rethinking of knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes, an alternative framework that legitimises early years educators as professionals who can influence policy and pedagogy into the future. As Freire (2005) argues, such change must begin with praxis, with critical reflection and action. For early years educators, this means rejecting internalised oppression and reclaiming agency through professional transformation. Such a revolution begins with '*commitment*' (Freire 2005, 60), a recognition of the need for pedagogical change at both a macro (policy) and a micro (setting and individual) level.

At the macro level, policy reform is essential. Internationally, workforce crises and rising educational needs demand a coherent ECEC strategy (Sakr, Halls, and Cooper 2024). In England, increasing funded places without addressing ratios, qualifications, and pay risks poor-quality provision (Pollard and Stephens 2024). Instead, transformation must include:

- Listening to the sector.
- Developing a high-quality workforce through improved qualifications.
- Aligning pay and conditions with schools.
- Increasing funding to support pedagogic change.

At the micro level, educators must commit to reflection and action. Transformation starts by ejecting the 'oppressor within' (Burawoy 2019), not through antagonism but through engagement with policy debates and sector-wide solidarity, and it is based on three key principles:

- Trust: Confidence in the workforce's ability to think critically and enact change.
- Solidarity: Collective commitment to professional transformation.
- Authenticity: Reflexive practice that fosters growth through experience and dialogue.

Through these principles, transformation begins with individuals and expands to settings and the sector at large. It is a sector '*rebirth*' (Freire 2005, 61) that involves recognising how pedagogic beliefs have been shaped by the ORF and reclaiming confidence in professional knowledge. Educators must become agents of change, engaging in liberating dialogue and acting with autonomy, integrity and pedagogical clarity.

Concluding thoughts

By combining Freire's critical pedagogy with Bernstein's pedagogic device and grounding this analysis in educators' lived narratives, this paper offers a distinctive dual-lens framework that not only exposes the mechanisms of de-professionalisation but also illuminates practical routes for reclaiming agency and

intellectual professionalism in ECEC. Examining early years professionalism in this way has highlighted the role of social actors in shaping discourse within both the ORF and PRF. It underscores the need for systemic reform and sector-wide commitment to authentic praxis, critical reflection and purposeful action.

In direct response to the guiding questions posed at the outset, our analysis shows that early years educators often *describe their professional identity as constrained and externally defined* yet simultaneously infused with a strong sense of moral purpose and pedagogical commitment. They *navigate the tensions* between official constructions of knowledge and their own lived understandings of practice through acts of adaptation, translation, and negotiation, balancing the demands of policy with the realities of children's needs. Crucially, *spaces of resistance and reframing do exist*, they are found in moments of collective reflection, in locally generated pedagogical choices, and in the assertion of educator voice against reductive policy discourses. These practices illuminate not only the fragility of professionalism under restrictive policy regimes but also its resilience, creativity and potential for renewal when grounded in solidarity and critical praxis.

While this paper is not without its limitations, with a small number of participants and a focus on the English education system, this paper has been able to offer a transferable model for reclaiming educator professionalism that can inform schooling systems globally – through challenging technocratic norms, foregrounding practitioner voice and providing a critical framework for rethinking teacher agency, policy engagement, and pedagogic practice across diverse educational settings. Our next steps are to take this further by comparing routes to professionalism in ECEC across the four nations of the UK, and then internationally.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (GPT-4o) as a tool for language improvement to support the reduction of our manuscript size. It has not been used for the generation of ideas, content or data. Any output generated has been rigorously reviewed to ensure that our submission meets the required standards of scholarly assessment, research and integrity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Victoria Bamsey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3339-1496>
 Lewis Fogarty  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0588-4306>

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