

*Hierarchies of Professionalism in Interprofessional Partnerships for Inclusion:  
Mapping the Role and Professional Identities of Early Years Educators<sup>1</sup>*

Alex Morfaki, Helen Bovill & Nicola Bowden-Clissold

Abstract

Despite the rhetoric emphasising partnership working there has been a dearth of research related to the educational practices that reify interprofessional partnerships for young children with special educational needs. This doctoral study examined the subtle power shifts in the interactions between early years educators and other professionals against the backdrop of deficit policy discourses and institutional challenges. This research adopted a case study approach and utilised methodological triangulation to unveil educators' phronetic knowledge. The findings point to power differentials and partnership inequities which affect the roles and identities of early years educators. Participants assumed emergent leadership roles that encompassed elements of social pedagogy and pedagogical eclecticism which eschewed medicalised interventions in favour of intuitive pedagogical approaches centred around the child and family.

Keywords: Interprofessional partnerships, early years' educators' roles, identities, special needs, hierarchies of professionalism

Identities and Professionalism Through Insider Research in the Early Years

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter has been developed using extracts from the thesis, Morfaki, A. (2020) Inclusion in the Early Years: An exploration of the dilemmas of difference, roles and partnerships in the operationalisation of inclusive practices for children with Special Educational Needs and Disability. [Thesis] Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education, University of the West of England.

The professional roles and identities of early years educators have warranted unprecedented attention in recent years as a result of an incessant raft of policy initiatives that aimed to increase childcare provision while professionalising the workforce, improving the quality of care and bridging gaps in attainment (Nutbrown, 2021; Archer, 2022). Ongoing efforts to upskill and professionalise the workforce have been deemed incohesive and inadvertently led to the perpetuation of deficit perceptions of early years educators (Osgood, 2012). Recent reports highlight successive governments' failures to attract and retain staff in the early years sector, which to a large part is attributed to poor working conditions, remuneration and low status (Bonetti, 2018; Pascal *et al*, 2020).

While issues surrounding qualifications and professionalisation dominate the agenda, distinct areas of practice such as interprofessional collaboration provide unique opportunities to investigate the roles and identities of early years educators, highlighting how the ramifications associated with low status and conditions affect their professionalism. The introduction of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004) signalled a milestone in the establishment of interagency partnership working, paving the way for integrated working and collaboration to improve welfare and developmental outcomes for children (Oliver *et al.*, 2010). The Special Educational Needs Code (DfE and DoH, 2015) further reinforced the concept of joint working and called for increased collaboration between educators, parents, and other professional partners (Hellawell, 2018). This alluded to an expansion of the roles of the early years workforce (Edwards *et al.*, 2012). Cohesive initiatives to provide training opportunities that would prepare the workforce for their new roles and responsibilities were less forthcoming (Richards, 2021).

This chapter reports on the findings of doctoral research conducted in the Southwest of England during 2016-2019 and adopted a qualitative case study approach, which comprised interviews and focus group discussion with fifteen early years educators. The aim was to explore interprofessional partnerships for inclusion formulated between early years educators, other professionals, and parents within naturalistic settings (Swarnborn, 2010). At the centre of case study lies phronetic knowledge which brings 'together stories from one's horizon of meaning but understood from one's own' (Thomas, 2010, p.579).

This project moved away from the traditional notions of theory which presupposes the exploration of a process from a distance (Citton, 2012). Instead, it focused on seeking the unpredictability of stories; exploring the fluidity of roles shaped by unspoken values (Egan, 2004) and the challenges emerging through institutionalised struggles (Holland and Lave, 2009) from the proximity afforded by an insider's perspective. The first author was a practising educator at the time of the research, who chose to conduct research with colleagues while acknowledging the ethical dilemmas of researching within one's own cultural and organisational context (Alvesson, 2003). The second and third author constituted the supervising team during the research lending expertise and experience on the subject.

The intentions of an insider educational researcher have been viewed with scepticism (Sikes, 2006) yet an insider perspective could give rise to valuable, situated knowledge that is fully conversant with the complex organisational realities of a community of practice (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Such knowledge could serve to deepen the understanding of the perceptions and practices of this community. Although studying one's own professional community presents methodological and ethical challenges, its contribution to doctoral studies has been underestimated particularly with relation to unveiling the tacit values and practices of professionals thus providing insights into areas of practice that remain misunderstood or inaccessible to 'outsider' researchers. Researching with colleagues is neither atheoretical, nor apolitical. While one should be mindful of the ethical implications of misrepresenting voices, the potential for advocacy and the unveiling of the specificities associated with roles and the formation of identities is more likely to emerge from within (Osgood, 2012; Harwood et al., 2013).

### Introduction: A Distinct Professionalism?

This chapter utilises stories to unveil the pedagogical and professional praxis of early years educators supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in partnerships with families and other professionals. The expansion of professional boundaries associated with interprofessional partnerships (Edwards et al., 2012) create action spaces (Boylan and Woolsey, 2015). These spaces afford opportunities for early years educators to

carve their own paths and reclaim their professional identity (Dreier, 2009). The challenges encountered and the power asymmetries formulated during interprofessional partnerships are explored to highlight how roles and identities are reformed within the nexus of SEND professionalism.

The development of professionalism and a distinct identity in early years has been viewed as a process which is 'socially constructed and culturally determined' (Simpson, 2010, p.6); enacted in communities and formulated in practice (Egan, 2004). Identities and roles are interlinked and formed and reformed 'in action' (Holland and Lave, 2009), as early years educators act and interact with others within their community and beyond. This chapter considers how this ongoing process helps early years educators become enculturated into the tacit values that govern their community. The professionalism of early years educators has been considered a top-down approach, dictated in part by government discourse, (Ball, 2015; Archer, 2022) enshrined into feminine stereotypes and a historicity of unqualified care (Osgood, 2012). However, voices from studies exploring early years educators' professionalism attest to their capability to develop agentic responses, formulate their own trajectories (Dreier, 2009) and author their professional stories (Urietta, 2007; Simpson, 2010; Payler and Georgeson, 2013)

The authors of this chapter refrain from adopting a deterministic approach to the formation of agency and identity (Taggart, 2011), which is seen as wholly constrained by sociocultural and institutional challenges. The findings of this research point to early years educators' capacity to overcome challenges and provide meaningful inclusive provision for the children in their care. Equally, we argue that their professional trajectory can reach a glass ceiling (Pascal et al., 2020). Early years educators' contribution to the education of children with SEND has been underestimated and critiqued (HM Government, 2022). The accountability imposed upon them by neoliberal regimes fails to account for the fragmentation of the sector and conflicting attempts by successive governments to re-regulate and de-regulate it (Archer, 2022). This research adds to the voices of prominent researchers in the field (Nutbrown, 2021; Archer, 2022). These voices call upon governments and policy makers to deconstruct the Early Years Education and Care (EYEC) sector in its current state and reconstruct a new field which strives for equity and respect and is underpinned by cohesive and well-funded policy initiatives.

## Theorising Early Years Educators' Professional Roles and Identities in Interprofessional Partnerships for Inclusion

The variance of qualifications (Nutbrown, 2021) noted across the early years sector has prevented the introduction of a universal training qualification to support early years educators in the implementation of the SEND Code. Whereas qualified teachers in schools were expected to complete a postgraduate qualification within a specified timeframe when undertaking the role of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), early years practitioners had to contend with short training courses provided by local educational authorities (Richards, 2021). Only recently has accredited training for Early Years SENCos been established (DfE, 2022). This 'anomaly' in training between school and Early Year SENCos remains (Layton, 2005). Early years practitioners have been expected to implement the SEND Code and apply the new requirements with variable support provided by local educational authorities (Richards, 2021). This, in combination with the disparate funding arrangements provided to educational authorities (Pascal et al., 2020), accounts for the significant variations observed among settings with relation to their capacity to include children with SEND and support them effectively (Sales and Vincent, 2018).

In their attempts to promote inclusion, early years educators are called to make decisions which are underpinned by ethical considerations and moral dilemmas (Norwich, 2014; Rose and Norwich, 2014). These complex decisions are not taken in isolation and presuppose the involvement of various professionals. The intersection of professionals in the enactment of collaborative inclusive practice is framed within cultural, structural, and institutional constraints (Salmon, 2004; Hall, 2005). Despite studies pointing to the importance of shared agendas and aims, these do not materialise unproblematically in practice (Palikara et al., 2018) and invariably lead to the fragmentation of provision which impacts the welfare of children, and their families (Sloper, 2004). Ideological alignment may be hard to achieve

among professionals of diverse backgrounds who have historically been used to working within different contexts. Boundaries within and between roles and professions become institutionalised and can lead to power imbalances and inequalities among partners (Griffin, 2010). The barriers to multiagency partnerships erected by institutional, cultural, and organisational structures have been reported widely in studies that explore social and health care professionals' roles (Salmon, 2004; Abbott et al., 2005; Griffin, 2010). In contrast, there has been a dearth of studies exploring the enactment of multi-professional partnerships between early years educators and other professionals (Palikara et al., 2018).

Wenger (2000, p.233) asserts that learning at the boundaries of communities of practice is enhanced for 'individuals and communities when experience and competence are in close tension'. The established tensions in multiagency partnerships- against a backdrop of incessant educational diktats and ambivalent political agendas- should provide a space for action where early years educators could negotiate their positionality and constitute their own professional identity (Urietta, 2007). In view of the increased demands placed upon the early years workforce to provide inclusive provision for diverse children populations, it becomes critical to map the professional roles and responsibilities of early years educators into new structures.

## Methodology

The participants in this study were selected based on their capacity to bring the phenomenon under study (Thomas, 2011) to the fore. The study used narration of critical events and professional stories. Participants were Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) and early years educators tasked with establishing interagency partnerships to meet the needs of children with SEND and families. They were deployed in settings that fell under the remit of Bristol and South Gloucestershire local authorities at the time of the study.

All fifteen participants were qualified educators: four possessed degrees and qualified teacher status (QTS), two held the postgraduate SENCo award and a third was working towards a Master's degree qualification at the time of the study, one held a Foundation degree, three held Early Years Teachers' status and four held National Vocational Qualifications or an NNEB in fields related to early years. The variety of qualifications reflects the disparity and plethora encountered in the early years sector in England and represents participants who held the international equivalent of tertiary education certificates, intermediate (foundation) and bachelors' degrees as well as more generalist postgraduate degrees and specialist postgraduate qualifications.

The theoretical lenses applied to interpret the narratives involved 'bricolage', a concept traced back to Claude Levi-Strauss (Citton, 2012). When applied to theory, bricolage advocates the explication of a process through the adoption of theoretical polytheism which embraces the in-disciplinarity of life which does not conform with the linearity and predictability of a singular theory. The analysis of the data set followed the phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) and was guided by an abductive reasoning approach that combined a dialogue between inductive and deductive logic (Pearce, 2012). The former provided an initial theoretical framework for the coding of tentative themes while the latter enabled the researcher to become surprised by the findings (Thomas, 2010) and review literature, expand upon codes and construct new themes. The themes reflected the experiences of educators and narrated stories that flowed organically and presented plausible evidence (Polkinghorne, 2007)

The research design adopted methodological triangulation (Natow, 2020) through interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews were conducted with seven Early Years SENCos deployed in a variety of early years settings; six of the SENCos were working in Private, Voluntary and Independent settings (PVI) and one in a maintained Children's Centre. Concurrently, the first author held focus group discussions attended by eight participants in the independent setting where she was employed at the time of the research. The combination of interviews and focus groups discussions can enhance the explication of a process by zooming in and out, thus allowing individual and collective views to emerge and converge or diverge to expose situated nuances (Lambert and Loiselle, 2007). This was pertinent to this study which sought to explore individual professional paths and collective

values through the exploration of sensitive topics that interviews foster, and the emergence of contextualised, relational values that focus groups elicit.

### Interprofessional Partnerships for Inclusion: Tensions, Hierarchies, and the Expansion of Roles

The educators' stories and narratives report the intersectionality of various partners in interprofessional partnerships against the backdrop of funding cuts and variable local authority support. Neoliberal thinking imposed by regulatory frameworks results in enhanced accountability and culpability (Archer, 2022). Subtle tensions are unveiled which often lead to power asymmetries and professional hierarchies. Educators respond by expanding their roles to encompass pedagogical leadership and family advocacy.

Partnership working was welcomed by many participants in this study who felt that their involvement was synonymous with good inclusive practice and resulted in advice that could enhance the environment on offer and support the early years educators in altering provision:

*I think working with outside professionals has been great for me and my experience of them supporting the children - just by having somebody else to come in and look at the environment. We see the environment every day and we think it's accessible for children and inclusive, but an outside professional might have other suggestions to make it more beneficial for the children.*

*(Sian, SENCo)*

For other educators, partnership working had come to acquire negative connotations as authorities had reportedly failed to develop an infrastructure that was conducive to developing effective partnerships. This had resulted in some educators becoming suspicious about the involvement of other professionals as they felt that their visits placed them under surveillance:

*I think we've been fortunate in our setting because we were fairly new as a team that came in; our council spent a lot of attention on us and made sure that we were comfortable with things. It's meant that we've got quite good relationships with all those people that are external, where I think a lot of settings see them as the enemy or that they're coming to check on us.*

*(Philippa, Early Years Teacher)*

The SEND code (2015, DfE and DoH) although clear in its aspirations on inclusive practice devolved responsibility and accountability of its pragmatic and practical interpretation to local authorities and schools (Commons, 2019; DfE, 2022). This resulted in local educational authorities creating organisational structures that differed based on the financial restrictions and the specificities framing implementation in respective micro-contexts (Ofsted, 2022). Subsequently, the support offered to settings could vary widely and miscommunication served to erect attitudinal barriers. Equally, participants demonstrated awareness of how top-down systems of working had introduced performative 'responsibilisation' (Ball, 2003; Hellowell, 2018).

*We are failing in general in the system because obviously you have to prove that you're working, you have to prove that you have observed a child, you have to prove that you have things in place...*

*(Edith, Early Years Professional)*

Successive governments' agendas designate early years educators as 'self-governing professionals' whose value and performance are measured by their ability to quantify their pedagogical contribution and input into measurable outcomes (Guy-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016, p.601). This has implications for inclusive pedagogy as its effectiveness is not framed solely within a discourse of increasing participation or belonging. Children are thus objectified and serve to meet political agendas; for children with special educational needs this could lead to 'othering' as they may not meet these externally imposed goals.

The strategies proposed by other professionals were often embedded within a clinical discourse (Ng et al., 2015) and favoured individualistic approaches (Thomas and Loxley, 2007), over educational interventions which revolved around the child and their interests. Although

support and input from other professionals was sought by early years educators, the advice provided was not considered applicable within a pedagogical context. The following extract from a discussion between three professionals demonstrates these frustrations:

*Lyra: it's good advice, but it's hard to implement, for instance, the external professional came in and did an activity and took two members of staff. We don't have two spare members of staff or a quiet room. It was a quiet room, the child was the only one in it and there were two staff in there to help him engage in the activity.*

*Edith: And then you need three people to do it because one is taking the photo.*

*Beatrice: One is holding to support. Really...*

*Lyra: Do we have three people to do that?*

*(Lyra, Early Years Practitioner; Edith, Early Years Professional; and Beatrice Early Years teacher)*

Early years educators questioned the feasibility of their application on the basis of the constraints imposed by the regulatory requirements of the curriculum and the realities of the early years classroom environment. Yet their critique was not influenced merely by practical considerations but demonstrated resistance, and agentic responses which are centred on their knowledge of the child and their tacit pedagogical insights:

*Sometimes they've given us advice and we've not agreed with it, we might have tried it for a little while because we're open to trying things. We know the children and if we think something works better and we're still achieving the same thing, then we will go with that. I think we've got the confidence to do that. Sometimes it's not like one strategy works for all children on the spectrum. So, it's knowing children as individually as we know all our children and what works for them.*

*(Patricia, SENCo)*

Patricia's account foregrounds the confidence that stems from getting to know the child and promotes tailored personalised approaches that meet their specific needs and interests. The knowledge of the child is deemed to be far more valuable. Her assertion aligns with a social model of disability; it eschews the notion of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches (Watson, 2012). Relationships with children are prioritised and seen to lead to intuitively appropriate strategies. The proclaimed confidence enables the adoption of alternative pedagogical provision which is equally effective while the professional 'openness' allows for other professionals' suggestions to be adopted to include 'trial and error' stances. While the multiplicity of input from other professionals is considered conducive to a holistic approach, it could lead to the educational and developmental compartmentalisation of a child and their exclusion from their community of peers as demonstrated by Sian's comments:

*We work with the individual educational plans so we complete those and that often contains input from professionals, but sometimes we can end up with speech and language targets...and physio has given us targets and hearing support has given us targets so the child then ends up with 10 targets that they should be working towards which I feel is too much. It's just streamlining and working with the parents to see what they feel is more important for the child.. They are, you know, with their peer groups...they want to follow their peers'.*

*(Sian, SENCo)*

The early years educators in this study developed an eclectic approach focused on what they considered important for the child and allowed for their inclusion in the established daily routine of the early years setting. The child's participation and sense of belonging were seen to be threatened by attempts to weave externally imposed, disparate targets into activities. These strategies were not consistent with the child's priorities and posed constraints that threatened their autonomy and prevented the development of ownership over their nursery life (Markstrom, 2009). In these cases, early years educators advocated for provision that allowed children to develop their own voice and fostered an ownership in the process of support. In doing so they clearly acted as child advocates, articulating the distinct values that underpinned their decision making and guided their pedagogical praxis:

*The speech and language therapist advised us to support, for example, two-word sentences with her, so rather than have the generic picture cards...we took photos of her engaging in these activities; she was eating, she was drinking, she was sitting. We made a copy so that the child could also have some ownership over that and have the same pictures at home as well.*

*(James, SENCo)*

The accounts of educators frequently conceptualised the children as co-investors (Sebba et al., 2011) in the process of their own learning. Attempts to implement strategies or introduce resources which were not meaningful were resisted and dismissed. The pedagogical assertiveness and eclecticism (Zierer, 2011) demonstrated, coupled with the confidence expressed, designated early years educators as ‘experts’ in children.

Despite the proclamations of expertise and the resistance against the attempts of other professionals to decontextualise or ‘specialise’ provision, participants often questioned decisions and expressed self-doubt over their professional abilities to meet the needs of the child:

*If you read and you research how much happens within the first five years, and in the first five years we are failing them, and then we are sending them to school and then what they were meant to do...we haven’t given it to them because none of us is really trained. I have the training, but I am not an expert...*

*(Samantha, SENCo)*

Samantha’s sense of failure could be partly ascribed to the ethical dilemmas encountered when faced with complex decisions over a child’s care or provision; these are underpinned by multiple, often contrasting, values (Norwich, 2014) and exacerbated in interactions with other professionals. On one hand, early years educators presented a self-assured stance which actively advocated for the child’s educational and personal rights, but on the other they appeared heavily reliant upon the reassurance offered by other professionals (Hall, 2005):

*It would be nice to have that professional support coming in because that team are amazing and they've got resources just to say, "Actually I think you're stepping too far ahead but come back and take a smaller step. That's really useful"*

*(Hayley, SENCo)*

Hayley's account may be seen as referring to the professional capital of external professionals and emphasised that their 'decisional capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2013) prevailed in the decision-making process of pedagogical strategy implementation. Successive government initiatives to professionalise the early years workforce have pointed to their professional deficits and lack of skill. This has served to undermine the social capital of the workforce, and juxtaposed it to that of traditional, highly regarded professions. The practitioners' accounts exposed a hierarchy of professionalism. The knowledge of the external professionals was thus valued and elevated to a higher order of professionalism (Thomas and Loxley, 2007), while early years educators were assigned the role of the understudy in the newly founded community of practice established through interprofessional partnerships (Wenger, 2000). Issues of dominance and validation came to the forefront and jeopardised the shared aims of an inclusive partnership which is focused on the child and their families. Despite the challenges encountered and self-doubt, early years educators had developed agentic responses and expanded upon their roles to proactively advocate for children and their families. This strength of advocacy can be seen in James' extract:

*We also had to organise a specific transition meeting for Mum. She did not attend the one for the school, so we really had to say to the school, "Please, please come in, and we'll orchestrate it here." because we were having issues with Mum dealing with anyone outside of nursery. We did manage to get them in and meet with her to explain what would happen and how that transition would look but it was a real challenge.*

*(James, SENCo)*

The educators in this study had crafted a working knowledge of the complexities of the system, understood its barriers, and the legislative, cultural, and institutional frameworks within which multiagency partnerships were operationalised. Equally, they acknowledged that some parents felt ostracised due to their perceived lack of system knowledge and felt unable to advocate for the child (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2008). In these cases, early years

educators used their capacity to navigate the system to the advantage of the family by acting as advocates and assuming responsibilities which would pave the way for the gradual involvement of other professionals. The role of the family advocate became crucial in the pursuit of inclusion. Good inclusive practice was not limited to the pedagogy in the early years classroom but extended to encompass social pedagogy:

*I've got some lovely examples of where settings have gone above and beyond and done really different things for different families, which has helped them to feel included, to be able to change their provision, to change the way they do things that suits a parent's needs... I think the family work can be even more important sometimes than what they're providing for the children.*

*(Anna, Early Years Advisor)*

As social pedagogues, early years educators' roles widened to support parents and act as mediators, putting strategies into place to enable collaboration between services with the aim of addressing the holistic needs of children and their families. The integrated role of the social pedagogue was evident in the accounts of the early years educators in this study but progressed beyond the care of the child to embrace support for the family (Kyriacou, 2009). The increasing calls for interagency collaboration in the field of special educational needs and disability have created an interface of practice which remains undefined yet appears to be operationalised by early years educators in their attempts to bridge gaps created by failures occurring in partnerships. Within this interface early years educators have emerged as 'brokers' (Wenger, 2000; Claridge, 2018) between communities of practice. They have developed strategies that allowed them to navigate the system while supporting children and their families. Their agentic responses demonstrate resistance and resilience in the face of professional hierarchies while their practices promote pedagogical eclecticism and educational partnerships which place the child and family at the heart of pedagogy.

### Mapping the Roles of Early Years Educators

The roles of early years educators in interprofessional partnerships for inclusion are multifarious and subject to intense policy regulation (Harwood et al., 2013). The latter places

an ever-increasing set of responsibilities upon them which install them in emergent leadership positions (Clark, 2012) undertaken willingly to support children and their families. The discourse promoting the ubiquity of inclusion and the rhetoric of effective multiagency partnerships has changed 'what they do and who they are' (Ball, 2015, p.306) Although SEND policy as an unproblematic discourse may have been assimilated and served to constitute educators as subjects of policy reproduction at ground level - who attested to the significance of early intervention and prevalent policy narratives - the reality of practice distanced them from the domination of government agendas, leading to interpretations demonstrating agency and distinct values.

The ethics of care (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2009; Osgood, 2012) demonstrated by the participants were governed by their knowledge of the child as a unique individual, whose specific needs and personal requirements were not compatible with 'one-size-fits-all' approaches and strategies that aim to homogenise populations of children with SEND on the basis of their characteristics or condition (Thomas and Loxley, 2007). They designated themselves as the experts in the child and proclaimed pedagogical practices that were carefully tailored to provide children with a sense of ownership which allowed them to exercise some control and agency in their daily lives. The implementation of external advice which was rooted in medicalised interventions was dismissed in favour of 'craft' pedagogical approaches (Florian and Black Hawkins, 2013) that demonstrated pedagogical eclecticism. Their eclecticism was not based on the arbitrary amalgamation (Zierer, 2011) of disparate professional advice but involved higher- order skills that enabled them to carefully select appropriate strategies and interpret medicalised interventions into meaningful pedagogical praxis that was situated and remained relevant to the child and the context.

Early years professionals' ethics of profession were guided by values that demonstrated adherence to an emotional discourse that transcended simplistic notions of care (Harwood et al., 2013) to proactively advocate for families, who were deemed to need support (Hellawell, 2017). Their experience of the system had equipped them with the capability to navigate the heavily bureaucratic processes associated with the implementation of the Code and had placed them in positions of trust, enabling them to take the lead, where required, to support transitions and provide families with an extended system of support in the long term. The role

of the social pedagogue displaced the emphasis from children's cognitive and developmental progress and favoured a holistic approach to children's well-being (Kyriacou, 2009).

Early years educators acknowledged that there were distinct hierarchies of professionalism governing the special educational needs field. Their role was not afforded the equivalent status and their views were not granted the gravitas associated with medical professionals. Issues surrounding lower status ascribed to early years professionals persevere and lead to power asymmetries in the operationalisation of partnerships. These enduring constructed hierarchies undermine early years educators' professional standing within the special educational needs episteme (Thomas and Loxley, 2007). Although integrated working points to a model of partnership which favours the involvement of various professionals and their contribution to a child's holistic development, the domination of medicalised professions with relation to special educational needs pose challenges to meaningful inclusive pedagogy.

The internalisation of policy discourses which on one hand emphasise inclusion for children and on the other promote agendas driven by outcomes (Glazzard, 2013; Hellawell, 2018), pose ethical dilemmas for early years educators. These lead to 'pedagogies of discomfort' (Boylan and Woolsey, 2015) and inquiring stances that serve to challenge professional moral codes and establish new ways of working. When ideology and practice collide (Ball, 2015) educators question and critique their own ontological and professional status. Concurrently, the gap between ideology and provision (Castro and Palikara, 2016) creates spaces for action. The tensions emerging when working at the interface of distinct areas become conducive to learning (Wenger, 2000). Early years educators respond to these opportunities by expanding their roles to encompass work with families and social pedagogy within their remit.

This study is a testimony to the capacity of a historically undervalued workforce to step up to the increasing requirements set upon them while demonstrating a commitment to the needs of the children and their families; their ethics of care have resulted in the conceptualisation of situated moral and professional codes which demonstrate pedagogical adaptability placing the child at the centre of well-informed and caring pedagogy. Their capacity to expand their roles despite the challenges imposed by differing agendas and disparate priorities - against the backdrop of funding cuts and accountability demands - attests to professionalism which is polymorphous and resilient. While the new training addressed to Early Years SENCos is a welcome development, the professionalisation of the early years workforce requires an

overhaul of the current system governing the ECEC sector. Current attempts to redress issues related to the professionalisation of early years educators fail to view the larger picture and focus on temporary solutions that perpetuate inequality for all involved: the workforce, families, and children with SEND.

The recent consultation on SEND (HM Government, 2022) points to a broken system which despite ongoing efforts to improve it remains underfunded, poorly governed, and highly bureaucratic. Issues surrounding parental distrust, fragmented working practices, and educators' accountability will persevere unless governments develop cohesive policy initiatives that address the entrenched issues. The increased responsibilities and implications for the professional roles of early years educators in integrated working cannot be resting on the good will of the workforce but have to be redressed. Collaborative networks, training seminars, and fora could serve to build shared understandings of meaningful strategies for young children in the face of distinct agendas and modes of working. However, such initiatives will remain tokenistic unless the government implements a universal early years model, which eschews consumer-led and outcome-driven approaches to childcare and education and moves towards a unified and cohesive approach (Cohen et al., 2021). Until then, early years educators' 'failures' should not be ascribed to their inefficient training or status but reflect on the failure of a whole system to support the early years workforce, the children in their care, and their families.

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