Early years professionals find themselves at the centre of great policy changes affecting the sector, including the current review of qualifications and training, but are they still the future of the workforce? Very much so.

As early years professionals (EYPs) we find ourselves used to change, and in many cases are the drivers of change – remember when ‘change agents’ was our moniker (CWDC, 2008)?

Once again, early years practitioners find themselves at the centre of a number of key policy changes, such as the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012), the move to the Teaching Agency, the revision of the EYPS standards and the impact of the interim Nutbrown review (Nutbrown, 2012). But what does this all mean for us as professionals and for future EYP training? In my opinion, it makes us more important than ever!

From some of the key changes there is a growing message of the coalition’s strategy. The revised EYFS and the emphasis on ‘school readiness’ (DfE, 2012), revised EYPS standards where the emphasis is on ‘learning and development’, as opposed to ‘development and learning’ (Faux, 2012 – my italics), the move of the CWDC to the Teaching Agency, the streamlining of the EYPS standards to mirror QTS standards and the introduction of the idea of an Early Years Initial Teacher Education (ITE) route (Nutbrown, 2012) could indicate a move to formalised education in the early years environment.

Within this context, EYPs can and should make their voices heard. We have been challenged by the children’s minister, Sarah Teather, to take a lead role in improving the achievement of children and to help to up-skill the workforce. By doing this she expects the profile of EYPs (and, in turn, the early years sector) to be raised.

This is not a new concept to either the current or past cohorts of EYP candidates. They are taught to hone their leadership skills and to demonstrate the way they work collaboratively – leading and supporting their colleagues, evaluating practice, suggesting innovative improvements and working constructively with parents to benefit the children in their care. While these concepts have always been the core tenet of EYPs, recent government focus has made them much more explicit.

As training providers, how can we give our candidates the skills they need to negotiate the changes ahead? Through the training provided for the four current EYPS pathways (Graduate Entry Pathway, Undergraduate Entry Pathway, Graduate Practitioner Pathway and Undergraduate Practitioner Pathway) we need to ensure that our programmes have the diversity and rigour to produce EYPs who have:

- A deeper understanding of the knowledge and theories that underpin good practice.
- The ability to be critically reflective practitioners and to encourage this in others.
- The ability to lead and support others in order to effect change and to improve outcomes for all children in their care.
- The ability to contribute to the continuing professional development for the staff they work with.

In addition, Whalley (2011) feels that EYPs should demonstrate:

- Skills in decision making.
- Sound knowledge of early years pedagogy, holistic needs of all children and the EYFS.
- A sense of the intrinsic worth of the child.
- The ability to define a vision for practice in a setting.
- A role-model and a competent agent of change.

By bringing all these themes together we, as providers, can give all EYPs the chance to fulfil and exceed Sarah Teather’s expectations and to take their rightful place as professionals within the early years environment.

When asked of the benefits of the EYPS programme, one of my current candidates felt that it had ‘increased my confidence and enabled me to speak out at staff meetings and to initiate changes that I might have been reluctant to do otherwise – doubting my own convictions!’ On the value of taking part in the programme, she added: ‘To be honest, I was a bit sceptical about the value of doing the EYPS course before I started, but I feel very different now and am totally convinced that it is an excellent way to improve the practice and leadership of practitioners working in early years.’

We also need to make quite clear the positive benefits of EYPs working with babies, and the fact that an EYP will have a holistic view of children’s development and learning from birth to the end of the foundation years. Allen (2011) is clear when he states ‘a baby’s early experiences are influential in determining the course of their future emotional, intellectual and physical development’.

THE WORLD never stands still – this is particularly pertinent with the coalition government and the current economic situation we find ourselves engulfed in.

...
From January this year (2012), candidates who hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) can self-fund as candidates on an EYPS pathway – we have a number of candidates in this situation who are gaining their first experience of working with babies and toddlers.

One candidate stated that the pathways have ‘given me the opportunity to work with babies – something I have never done before and which I have found hugely rewarding and worthwhile’. Others found that it had given them ‘a much wider experience of children [from birth to five-years-old] particularly with the baby/toddler placement’.

Candidates are working with children from birth to three-years-old using fresh eyes, being able to marvel at the pace of growth and development, linking theory to practice and realising the importance of understanding how they can have positive impacts on these children.

Mathers et al’s (2011) report on the Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Final Report highlights that there are less EYPs working with the youngest of children, than with older children, and gives indicators as to why this may be. As an EYP training provider I feel it is key that we continue to promote the importance of working with babies and to encourage employers to deploy their EYPs to baby/toddler rooms.

Reflecting on Whalley’s (op cit) comment about an EYP having ‘sound knowledge of early years pedagogy’ and linking this with the Nutbrown interim review has enabled me to critically evaluate her suggestion that there should be ‘an Early Years Initial teacher Education (ITE) route, leading to QTS, which covers age 0-7’ (2012).

There have been many discussions of the binary opposites of ‘teacher and pedagogue’ and how this impacts on the early years. I realise that Professor Nutbrown is considering some of these arguments in preparation for her final review but I would like to make the following comments.

Her report states that there are 9,365 accredited EYPs, with a further 2,000 in training, and it details that some EYPs have used their training as a springboard to QTS. It is easy to acknowledge why this happens and I could cite work done by Aspect (2009) on the pay and working conditions of EYPs. However, I would like to propose an alternative solution.

We will soon have somewhere in the region of 11,500 accredited EYPs who are doing their best to deliver high quality pedagogical practice across their settings. Let us consider a solution that will build on these skilled professionals’ leadership and practice, and...
Training

Early years professionals have led the workforce in improving outcomes for children

embraces a new way forward. Link EYP with QTS by making it award-bearing, ensure (with suitable financial support) there is parity between pay and conditions, make funding available for current EYPs’ continuing professional development to ‘convert’ to an ITE-equivalent, with a strong pedagogical approach and focus on the holistic child, from birth to five.

The voices of EYPs and the value they place on their training are important indicators of the positive strength of feeling from both past and current candidates about becoming an accredited EYP. These have been validated through research, such as the First National Survey of Practitioners with EYPS (CWDC, 2011) and are supported by anecdotal feedback from previous candidates on the development of their professional identity:

- ‘I feel as though I have learned so much in the process and gained so much as a leader.’
- ‘We are proud of our busy nursery and believe that the EYP status has created an inspiring management team leading an enthusiastic workforce.’
- ‘We receive regular compliments from new families about how easily their children have settled and how impressed they are with the information they are given and the development of new skills they can see in their children on a weekly basis. Much of this has been the result of the improved knowledge within our staff team and the enthusiasm from our EYP’s has cascaded throughout the nursery.’

- ‘I am extremely proud of achieving EYPS, which enabled me to continuously strive to offer a better service to our children.’

We have a different way of delivery now – the University of Chichester leads the South of England Early Years Consortium, which includes the following partnership organisations: University of Brighton; Canterbury Christ Church University; University of Portsmouth; Tribal Group; University of Winchester.

This partnership gives us the strength and quality to share and develop newer and more innovative best practice, which in turn, allows us to better prepare our new EYP candidates to overcome some of the challenges they face. We all passionately believe that learning is not just for young children and we offer opportunities no matter what stage a candidate may be in their career. We want to make sure the best people get involved and that might mean you are a man or woman, any age, background or ethnicity. We want bright, enthusiastic and creative people to join us in making a real difference.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to bring us back to the thought that EYPS is now more important than ever. As an EYP myself, and a programme coordinator, I cannot stress enough the positive benefits that attaining EYPS can bring, this can be supported from the voices of current and past EYP candidates.

Through the EYPS pathways, candidates have been growing wings – now let them fly!

Key points

- As early years professionals we find ourselves used to change, and in many cases are the drivers of change
- Early years practitioners find themselves at the centre of a number of key policy changes, such as the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012), the move to the Teaching Agency, the revision of the EYPS standards and the impact of the interim Nutbrown review (Nutbrown, 2012), which means we are more important than ever!
- Within this context, EYPs can and should make their voices heard. We have been challenged by the children’s minister, Sarah Teather, to take a lead role in improving the achievement of children and to help to up-skill the workforce

References

Children’s Workforce Development Council (2011) First National Survey of Practitioners with EYPS. CWDC: London