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## Attitudes and the early years workforce

Jan Georgeson & Verity Campbell-Barr

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## EDITORIAL

### Attitudes and the early years workforce

#### Introduction

Our motivation in putting out a call for papers for this special issue came from working with colleagues from UK, Italy and Hungary on a small research project involving our own higher education institutions, in which we compared staff and students' perceptions of the attitudes needed to work with young children (Georgeson et al. 2015; Campbell Barr, Georgeson, and Varga, *forthcoming*). This project had been prompted by an interest in the role of workforce development and the European Reference Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, which defines competences as 'a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context' (European Commission 2007, 3). These three aspects of competences are also well established in the research literature on teacher education (for example Collinson, Killeavy, and Stephenson 1999; Darling-Hammond 2005). They appear under headings such as content knowledge, pedagogical skill and appropriate dispositions and attitudes, and frequently form the basis of teachers' professional standards and associated qualifications.

We began to notice some fluidity in the use of the terms 'disposition' and 'attitude' to refer to individual characteristics, both in our own data and in policy and research. Often these two terms appear together as 'dispositions and attitudes' and are not distinguished from each other; instead they tend to be used as a sort of useful basket of general mental qualities that teacher/practitioners might need in their work, alongside knowledge and skills. In those cases where the two words are explicitly defined, there is a tendency to use them to represent different levels of mental orientation. Definitions of 'disposition' often refer to a broader more enduring tendency to behave in a particular way when responding in a variety of situations (for example – a nervous disposition would be associated with showing nervousness in differing contexts over time). Definitions of 'attitude' on the other hand often refer to elements of a system of beliefs about ideas, things and people in the world that have different components (emotional, motivational, intellectual and evaluative) and are differentially open to change. Lilian Katz, in the course of her work on the importance of the development of positive dispositions to learning in early childhood education, offers helpful definitions of both dispositions and attitudes that highlight the breadth and stability of dispositions and the directionality and specificity of attitudes:

A disposition is a pattern of behaviour exhibited frequently and in the absence of coercion, and constituting a habit of mind under some conscious or voluntary control, and that is intentional and orientated to broad goals. (Katz 1993, 16).

[Attitude] is usually defined as 'a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner to a

given phenomenon' (Rokeach 1968, 12) or as 'an evaluative tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavor' (Eagly 1992, 693). [...] [A]ttitudes can be thought of as pre-dispositions to act positively or negatively with respect to a particular phenomenon. According to this definition it is possible to have an attitude toward something without accompanying behaviour. (Katz 1993, 9–10)

The emphasis on an individual's behaviour and links to action attest to Katz's reference to the extensive psychological literature on attitudes in the development of her definitions. In comparison with knowledge and skills, dispositions and attitudes are difficult to assess; consequently much research into the identification and assessment of teachers' dispositions has been carried out, prompted by the need to inform recruitment, accreditation, course design and assessment in relation to teacher education. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the US, for example, has defined professional dispositions as 'constructive behaviors such as professional attitudes, values, and beliefs exhibited by educators through verbal or nonverbal means to students, families, colleagues, and the communities' (NCATE 2010, cited in Cummins and Asempapa 2013). Elements of this definition regularly appear in course documentation, although the validity of assessing dispositions has not gone unchallenged (Schussler 2006, cited in Cummins and Asempapa 2013).

However, despite the definitional and psychometric work in this area, difficulties over how to divide up the disposition–attitude–emotion space persist in the ways in which these terms are used in policy and research, and these difficulties are reflected in the papers in this special issue. While the first and last two papers frame their work in similar terms to those defined by Katz, the remaining three papers approach the study of attitudes from other disciplines, namely philosophy (Maier-Hofer), sociology (Andrew) and therapy/counselling (Taggart). Their use of 'attitude' and 'disposition' do not map exactly on to Katz's definitions, although they do reflect aspects of stability, directionality or orientation and action in the world. We have found that insights provided by these papers are helping us to think about how 'dispositions-and-attitudes' (to employ the frequently used conjunction) link with emotion, knowledge and skills to reveal the increasing complexity of work in the early years sector.

### ***Qualifications in the Early Years sector***

International interest in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has led to increased focus on the role that early years teachers and practitioners play in developing the quality of early years services, especially given that it is now well established that high-quality early years provision supports children's holistic development. Coming from the UK, we are well versed in debates on the early years workforce; policy developments to upskill the workforce have prompted discussions about what it means to be a professional in early years services (Urban 2008; Osgood 2010; Georgeson and Payler 2014) and more recent debates have focused on the level of qualification required by those who work in ECEC (Nutbrown 2012; Eisenstadt et al. 2013). The UK is not alone in exploring the nature and qualifications of the ECEC (Oberhuemer 2000; Dalli 2006; Vandenbroeck and Peeters 2008), but a focus on qualification levels alone does little to answer questions about what having a qualification does to support the development of

quality – is it attendance at lectures, writing essays or practical placements (for example), or a combination of these, that is necessary if practitioners are to contribute to the quality of ECEC?

The focus on qualification levels reflects debates on the quality of early years services being constructed by modernist frameworks favouring measurable features which can be correlated with culturally desirable child outcomes (Rosenthal 2003; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013), although, not surprisingly, countries vary in the standards that they require of the ECEC workforce. Post-structuralist approaches critique prevailing modernist assessments of quality for their failure to capture the complexity of working with young children (Urban 2008; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, *forthcoming*). However, the focus on ‘competence’ in the European Reference Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning demonstrates the predominance of technocratic approaches to the early years workforce. Some countries have adopted a competence based model (Vrinioti 2013) and this interplays with the cultural context of individual countries (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). The term competence ‘suggests that an employee has an ability to do something satisfactorily – not necessarily outstandingly or even well, but rather to a minimum level of acceptable performance’ (Herling 2000, 9) and the CORE team (2011), in their review of the literature on competence in ECEC, also identified competence as being about a sufficient level of knowledge and skills. Cameron and Moss (2007), exploring competence in relation to care work, conclude that the competent worker is one who is good at what they do and has acceptable standards of work, although this is frequently framed within technical and instrumental visions of care work. Vandenbroeck, Peeters, and Bouverne-De Bie (2013, 114) discuss how competence has been ‘narrowed down to a more technical professionalism’ that is ‘aimed at “doing things right” rather than “doing the right things”’. Competence can become focused on assessable knowledge and skills, with the implication that these are fixed and universal, but post-structuralist approaches warn us that ‘there can be no universal conception of workplace competence’ (FitzSimons 2002).

There could be a temptation to settle for a ‘good enough’ workforce for ECEC, but this does not sit well with a strong belief that ECEC plays an important role within society and that children deserve high-quality services. Vandenbroeck, Peeters and Bouverne-De Bie’s (2013) discussion of competence is helpful not only for raising questions about the focus on a technocratic approach to a competent ECEC workforce, but also because they remind us what such a technocratic approach fails to capture. The importance of the attitudinal aspects of early years work is evident to those who are involved in it. Georgeson et al. (2015) found that both those who support early years practitioners (such as local government officials) and practitioners themselves identified with a set of dispositions for guiding work with young children, framed by constructions of their role in supporting children’s development. Other research with practitioners has identified that they describe their role in terms of a feel and an ethos (Cottle and Alexander 2012) and an ethic of care (Osgood 2006). There has been a long-standing emphasis on the importance of a caring disposition and the capacity for emotional commitment, often referred to as ‘passion’, when working with children (Moyles 2001; Osgood 2010). In the context of professional development for initial and continuing members of the early years workforce, there is a risk of assuming that, if people have found their way on to an early childhood course, they very likely already have

certain general dispositions, inherent and enduring qualities of mind and character that mean they are well suited to the early years workforce. With the growing dominance of measurable assessments of quality in ECEC (Fenech 2011), the importance of those aspects of quality, such as the dispositions and attitudes of practitioners, which are less amenable to measurement could be taken for granted. There is a risk that essential aspects of the contribution of practitioners already in the workforce may be ignored. In addition, those at the start of their professional development – those who will be the next generation of the early years workforce and central in creating holistic learning experiences for young children – may also not be appropriately prepared.

### *The articles in this issue*

There was a strong response to our call for papers on the topic of attitudes in the early years, and in addition to the papers in this special issue, further papers will be appearing in subsequent issues. The six papers here, from Greece, Australia, Germany, England and the USA, draw on different disciplines to investigate and/or theorise the attitudes and dispositions required for working in the early years sector and the role of professional development in promoting/developing or exploiting these in relation to knowledge and skills. To accommodate different terms used in different countries, ‘educators’, ‘teachers’ and ‘practitioners’ are variously used to refer to people already in the workplace, and ‘students’ and ‘tutors’ to those engaged in initial training and the staff who support them.

We recognised in the first paper by Galini Rekalidou and Eugenia Panitsides a starting point similar to our own – an interest in what students thought was needed to work in the early years and what they thought universities could do to prepare them for this work. The authors’ motivation in carrying out this study was clearly rooted in their own context; however, their interest was prompted by a particular concern about attrition in the early years workforce and a ‘wave’ of early retirement in Greece. They point to the importance of good preparation for the complexity of work with young children at a time when ‘the socio-economic levels of families has deteriorated, affecting both children’s behaviour and teacher burnout’. This situation could place extra demands on teachers’ capacity to manage classrooms, which could result in emotional difficulties and possibly frustration leading to their leaving the profession. To address this concern, the authors have initiated a longitudinal study, the first phase of which is reported in this paper, of students’ prior beliefs about working in the early years sector before their entry to the profession, their expectations of the course upon which they have enrolled and their judgements about the extent to which these expectations were met. fifty first-year students from one cohort completed a two-part survey and, to offer a comparison from a more experienced group, a mixed sample of 104 recent graduates from the same course completed the same survey with an extra section asking whether their expectations about the course had been fulfilled. The survey included items designed to capture prospective early years teachers’ views about the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for the early years profession, and which would be developed on the course. For both first-year and recent graduate students, what the authors describe as personality traits (patience, love for children and perseverance), which could be equated with dispositions, were rated most highly as needed for work in early years, while knowledge of pedagogy and social sciences was rated

lower. The item with the lowest mean rating was firmness, indicating a negative attitude towards authoritarian approaches to discipline. In contrast, what both groups of students expected from the course was to develop new knowledge related to pedagogy, in addition to what the authors describe as 'soft skills'. One item relating to attitudes, respecting diversity, received the fourth highest mean rating; this is not something that features strongly in the studies reviewed by the authors, or indeed in our own data, and could reflect present concerns in Greece. In conjunction with the negative attitudes towards authoritarianism, this offers an optimistic response to the authors' concerns about whether potential new entrants to the profession have the sort of attitudes which will sustain their teaching in the early years sector through difficult socio-economic times.

The next paper in this issue, by Yarrow Andrew reporting on early childhood practice in Australia, is also concerned with demands made on educators and ways to build their resilience in stressful times. Andrew focuses on the emotional load which their work places on educators, but then goes on to argue persuasively that this not only enables them to build up emotional capital for supporting children and families, but could also provide them with resources to promote their own well-being. Andrew uses the ancient Greek concepts of *episteme* ('pure' knowledge), *techne* (technical skills) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to consider the different kinds of knowledge that are needed to work with children. This echoes the knowledge, skills and dispositions/attitudes triad mentioned earlier, but the author then focuses on *phronesis* as the embodied knowledge that is built up in everyday practical engagement in working directly with children and families. This 'practical wisdom is often difficult to articulate because it works on a fuzzy logic which takes into account situation, context, the varying needs of a shifting constellation of bodies and objects and the emotions that circulate within these settings'. Such practical wisdom may draw on the official knowledge and skills taught in initial and continuing professional development, but may not always agree with what these would proscribe because standardisation for qualification and assessment has a tendency to decontextualise, and it is the very sensitivity to context which makes *phronesis* so appropriate.

Having highlighted the importance of contextualised practical wisdom, Andrew goes on to consider the particular sociological contexts of the educators who possess this wisdom and the emotional labour entailed by work in these contexts. Rather than dwelling on the possibly exploitative way in which educators have to perform emotional work for others, Andrew suggests educators can '[draw] on their own emotional resources' to counteract the low value often placed on work with young children'. Data gathered from interviews with early childhood educators are used to explore emotional capital, which Andrew understands as dispositional understanding, and to develop a model of emotional capital. Three elements of this model are described in the paper – empathy, insight and resilience – and for each the importance of building practical wisdom through day-to-day engagement in context is highlighted. Attitudes are understood as 'strategic responses to emotional challenges' that are specific to a context and these responses derive from the dispositional understanding built through everyday work in that context. Andrew's important contribution to supporting the work of early childhood educators lies in the argument that educators can use their considerable emotional capital to improve their own well being, and that of their colleagues, leading to a more resilient workforce 'with the emotional insight to challenge the inequalities of the system'.

The underlying argument of Andrew's paper – that early childhood educators' sense of how they see themselves can be enhanced through their own recognition of how they respond sensitively to the moment-on-moment changing emotions, needs and wishes of others – anticipates the exploration of attitude and emotion in the next paper. Claudia Maier-Höfer also invites us to consider the kinds of knowledge that generally form the basis of teacher education courses before focusing on why it is important to contemplate the development of a professional attitude 'less related to orthodox thought and positionings of those who know and those who are trained to know what is assumed to be of any importance'. She describes a transformational pedagogy sensitive to children's expressions and considers the implications that adopting such a pedagogy might have both for practitioners and for those who support them towards adopting it. To analyse this approach to working with young children, Maier-Höfer draws on the distinction made by Henri Wallon between attitude and posture; attitude is the mirroring of self that can help to stabilise professional identity, and posture connects one person to another in the moment, adjusting to changes in their emotions and wishes.

To focus on her particular use of both 'posture' and 'attitude' we have found it helpful to think about senses of the words that draw on body positioning (attitude) and presentation (posture) and to remind ourselves of the aspects of stability and orientation which featured in the definitions of disposition and attitude offered by Katz. Working with Wallon's distinction leads Maier-Höfer along a different path, via Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of affectivity and desire, to understanding how educators might respond sensitively to children. While we might recognise many of the points in her argument along the way, she arrives at a challenging conclusion that might not be a comfortable destination for everyone. Maier-Höfer first explores in detail an example of a pedagogic episode recounted by Schulte, which shows how his concern to '[create] an image of himself as a brilliant pedagogue, which [the student] was positioned to reflect,' limited his student's participation because Schulte, although sensitive to what his student was doing, 'did not notice anything about his posture.' Using Wallon's concepts, Maier-Höfer analyses this encounter and its implications and this leads her to a 'paradoxical moment' of recognising how insights gained from following this analysis might coexist with the approach to knowledge and professionalism usually emphasised in teacher education. She offers Olsson's concept of a 'thinner skin mentality' to encourage educators to escape the rigidity of orthodox thought and to adopt a heightened attentiveness to the 'continuously changing forms' of children's creations and 'opt to become part of these processes without feeling they need to predict or control them'. This might require the inculcation of a different attitude to stabilise their professional identity that does not involve propelling children in the direction chosen by their educators. For those of us steeped in the discourse of 'narrowing the gap' and proleptic teaching that anticipates what we think children will need to be able to do later and so need preparing for now, this might take something of a leap of faith. Maier-Höfer's answer would be that the very act of objectifying our responses in this way could help us understand the 'dynamics of dominant knowledge' and act then as a reference point when connecting with children's dreams and desires and the problems they pose themselves. By combining deep awareness of our own attitude with a 'thinner skin mentality' when we participate in activities with children, we could begin to enact a more transformational pedagogy with the capacity for learning and innovation.

The next two papers rise to the challenge posed by Maier-Höfer by proposing ways in which a more attentive kind of professionalism might be encouraged. Geoff Taggart, echoing Andrew's and Rekalidou and Panitsides' concerns about how practitioners cope with the stressful aspects of their work, considers how practitioners might be supported towards a more balanced use of their emotional resources. He highlights the ambivalence (in the sense of having both positive and negative aspects) inherent in emotional labour, and argues for recognition of the emotional costs as well as the emotional rewards of the work that early childhood practitioners do. Taggart focuses on their capacity for and inclination towards attunement, which he describes as both the practice and disposition of 'tuning in to the child and attending sensitively to his or her needs'. He argues that this can be achieved through the development of a mindful attitude, drawing here on the emerging success of mindfulness approaches as a therapeutic practice in the caring professions. Mindfulness has been defined as 'the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding experience moment to moment' (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 145) or 'simply slowing down enough to notice [which] serves as an empathetic function' (Reynolds 2003, 10). Taggart contrasts this present moment awareness with the 'getting-ready-for' mode of thinking prompted by practitioners' concerns over safety, accountability and what children need to do next.

There are clear overlaps here with Maier-Höfer's endorsement of the 'thinner skin mentality' leading to an openness to children's dreams and desires, and Taggart describes a mindfulness exercise which he introduced into training for early childhood practitioners to encourage them to develop their capacity to notice. This approach creates an interesting interplay between skills, behaviours, attitudes and dispositions; students were asked to carry out an exercise and behave in a certain way using particular skills to help them develop a mindful attitude towards others in order to encourage a disposition towards attunement. The exercise was part of a module on the 'professional self' that also included dialogic practices such as group supervision. Taggart then invited students to complete a survey to investigate the success or otherwise of this initiative. Students gave a mixed response to the mindfulness session, with half of them reporting that it had had a large impact; given that they were only asked to imagine interacting with children after the exercise, this is perhaps not surprising. It would be interesting to hear their reactions, were they able to repeat the activity and then participate 'in the moment' with children as described by Maier-Höfer. Taggart also collected narrative responses about memorable exercises during the module, and here many students mentioned the dialogic aspects of group activity. There is a strong suggestion in their responses that this module was indeed supporting students in stabilising a different kind of professional self by looking both inwardly and in relation to others, and moving towards the 'greater sensitivity to relational and situational affectivity' that Maier-Höfer suggests should form part of qualification for work in the early years sector.

It is also clear from Taggart's paper that students can find elements of such an approach difficult; it 'holds up a mirror to their own lives in an uncomfortable way' and the exploration of feelings in relation to working in early childhood settings therefore needs careful handling by tutors. This is also the case in the next paper by DeVore, Fox, Heimer, and Winchell, who describe a piece of action research investigating both group and individual reflective activities for students on an Early Childhood Education programme in the USA. DeVore et al. describe a

wide range of activities that they have developed to promote students' reflection on their own attitudes, behaviour and identity in relation to the complex lives of children and families with whom they will work. Reflection can often be presented as the route to self-understanding and an essential aspect of preparation for and conduct of teaching, but telling someone to reflect does not in itself enable them to do it. The activities described by DeVore et al. offer suggestions for tools and activities to encourage and structure reflection, with a particular focus on sensitive attitudes towards disadvantaged members of society and a disposition to promote social justice. The activities include group discussions, guided writing, extended role play and theoretical mapping activities that combine the development of skills (such as using strengths based language), knowledge (of ecological systems theory) and relationship building (both within the student group and with families whom they interviewed). As well as the mirror reflecting back to the self that Taggart mentions, DeVore et al. suggest that such activities offer a window into understanding other people, thereby supporting their aims to encourage students to think both about their own identity and about their posture in relation to others, particularly children and families, but also other professionals.

The role of the tutor in these activities was crucial to facilitate discussions, support students to make connections between their attitudes and the development of a pedagogy for social justice, as well as to respond to emerging themes that students raised in order to shape subsequent teaching on the course. The approach adopted by DeVore and her colleagues therefore highlights the need for tutors also to be attuned to the dreams, desires and emotions of their students, while at the same time encouraging students to adopt such a stance towards children and families they will meet in the workplace. Just as this attunement makes demands on practitioners' emotional capital, tutors on teacher education courses also face such demands, and part of DeVore et al.'s research is concerned with the benefits for tutors of 'meeting in the circle' to 'open up' when reflecting back on successes and oversights in the implementation of different activities.

The final paper in this issue, by Lunn Brownlee and colleagues from Australia and the USA, also focuses on the issue of responsibility for the professional learning of others, but moves this from higher education institutions into the workplace. Increased investment in professional development for the early years workforce has led to a growing and as yet unregulated 'industry' to deliver this and leaders in early childhood settings have to make decisions about possible professional development opportunities for staff within their remit. Lunn Brownlee et al. have been investigating leaders' attitudes to this decision-making and in this paper set out their current thinking on ways in which this might be conceptualised. They draw on social psychological theory of attitudes and on research into professional learning, which they distinguish from professional development activities and understand to include changes in attitudes, beliefs and values. The authors focus on the cognitive dimension of attitudes because they are particularly interested in how groups and individuals might develop an evaluative stance. They interview six leaders of early childhood settings to investigate their understanding of what constitutes an evaluative stance in decision-making about professional development opportunities.

Although they focus on a specific aspect of leaders' attitudes to decision-making, Lunn Brownlee et al.'s examination of both attitudes and professional learning picks up similar threads to those woven through the earlier papers, about the nature of knowledge, affect and directionality in attitudes and the importance of

group work for reflection. In particular, their explanation of the conceptual framework which underpins an evaluative stance prompts the reader to consider the wider applicability of some of the conceptual tools they describe. Practitioners are increasingly asked to make evidence-based decisions, for example about interventions for children with additional needs (DfE 2015, 6.27), and it can be difficult to sort out competing claims in the context of one's own emotional response to a particular process, idea or resource. Lunn Brownlee et al. argue that leaders who bring an evaluative personal epistemology, or set of beliefs about knowledge and knowing, are likely to reflect more widely in the process of reaching evidence informed decisions. They build on Doecke et al. (2008) six principles of professional learning, which they call the '6 Cs' and which echo the '4 Cs of twenty-first-century learning' – creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration – that are closely linked to the European Union Key Competences. These principles embrace the complexity and contextual nature of knowledge, critical thinking skills and dispositions towards engagement in inquiry – as well as towards working in collaboration not only with other educators, but with children, families and the wider community.

## Conclusion

As well as reminding us of the complexity of work in the early years sector, the papers in this special issue encourage consideration of the nature of knowledge and how it is formed by those who work with young children. In particular, the papers highlight the relationship between different kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes/dispositions, while suggesting that more consideration should be given to practical wisdom and dispositional understanding – aspects that do not lend themselves well to assessment, evaluation or indeed investigation. One of the difficulties we have faced in our own research is making visible the tacit knowledge that guides much of the work of early years educators/practitioners/teachers and what it is that shapes this knowledge. Two related features have contributed to our own understanding. The first concerns the construction of the workforce – what kind of workforce is desired and by whom? Earlier we referred to the connection between the quality of early years services and the quality of the workforce. Understandings of quality are shaped by culturally desirable child outcomes. Features of good quality, including the workforce, are therefore constructed in relation to child outcomes, and to those who are charged with promoting these outcomes. The creation of the 'good' or 'right' child is concomitant with the creation of the 'good' or 'right' early years practitioner. Policy is frequently critiqued for formulating constructions of the early years workforce that do not represent what those working with children view as important, including the construction of their dispositions and attitudes. As Taggart reminds us, official discourses of professionalism, as captured in standards, often seem to be at odds with 'grassroots' professionalism. We think, however, that we as researchers and tutors should also be wary of constructing what we view as the 'good' early years worker or student. Implicit in the papers is an assumption that it is desirable to develop attitudinal competence in the context of early years. This is not surprising, given the focus of the special issue, but suggests a possible area for further research, namely the attitudes and dispositions held by those who are involved in the professional development of both the existing, and also the next, generation of the early years workforce.

Recognising our own roles in the construction of the workforce brings us to the second point; the importance of relationships in the shaping of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Relationships feature strongly throughout the papers – with children, with families, with tutors and between students or between team members. The definitions of competence that we explored earlier focused on the individual but working with young children is anything but individual; it is shaped by the children and families whom we encounter, the students and colleagues with whom we work (both as tutors and in early years settings) but also the wider cultural context. There is a desire to move beyond competence-based models focusing on technocratic assessments of the workforce to something much deeper that guides working with young children. This ‘something’ is a professional identity realised in relation to others. Early years work requires both stability-within-self, promoted by an awareness of one’s own disposition and personal epistemology, and the capacity to respond flexibly to the changing needs/wishes/emotions of others. The authors of the papers in this special issue suggest, however, that the early years sector should be moving beyond the stabilised self within the setting to engage in action and challenge orthodoxies beyond the setting. At present there is not much evidence that practitioners in settings or students in training want to move in that direction. The challenge for those responsible for professional development of the workforce is to consider whether encouraging practitioners to engage in political advocacy is part of their remit.

Bottery has argued that

Educational leaders need to help individuals look into themselves, to stand back from the demands of everyday life and reflect upon how current circumstances and problems provide new insights into who they are. (Bottery 2004)

While the authors of papers in this special issue might agree with most of this statement, they would probably disagree with the idea of standing back from everyday life. In contrast, the arguments presented in the papers here suggest that it is by participating in the everyday life of early years settings that knowledge about self and context is built.

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Plymouth University, Plymouth, UK  
(Guest Editors)