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Nutbrown, C. [orcid.org/0000-0001-6100-7511](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6100-7511) (2021) Early childhood educators' qualifications: a framework for change. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 29 (3). pp. 236-249. ISSN 0966-9760

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1892601>

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Cathy Nutbrown

To cite this article: Cathy Nutbrown (2021) Early childhood educators' qualifications: a framework for change, International Journal of Early Years Education, 29:3, 236-249, DOI: [10.1080/09669760.2021.1892601](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1892601)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1892601>



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Published online: 22 Mar 2021.



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## Early childhood educators' qualifications: a framework for change

Cathy Nutbrown 

School of Education, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

### ABSTRACT

In the context of an ongoing policy crisis in relation to the qualifications of the early childhood workforce in England, this paper first rehearses the context and long overdue need for reform before presenting a framework for career structure and professional early childhood education qualifications in England. This framework is designed to address difficulties of recruitment, retention, and progression, and thereby raise the status of qualifications and the roles they enable early years practitioners to undertake. The paper ends by reiterating the importance of qualifications for those working in early childhood education, what they need to study and how what they study equips them for their various roles.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 June 2020  
Accepted 2 January 2021

### KEYWORDS

Early childhood education;  
practitioners; teachers;  
educators; qualifications

### Introduction: the context of ECE qualifications in England

Despite several attempts over more than a decade to address the issue of qualifications for early childhood educators, there remains a workforce policy crisis in England (Nutbrown 2012; DfE 2013, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). This paper first reviews the context of the problem and the long overdue need for positive change. Focussing on the English context, the paper then proposes a career and qualifications framework which sets out potential career progression linked to related qualifications. This leads to a consideration of why qualifications matter, by examining early education professionals' key roles in supporting young children's learning. This is not to deny the many other responsibilities of those who work with young children, including safeguarding, health, safety and well-being, working with families, and collaboration with other professionals and organisations in relation to individual children. Rather, in seeking to establish the importance of well-educated educators (Nutbrown 2018), the paper centralises the complexity of fostering young children's learning and development.

In the absence of shared nomenclature for those who work in early childhood education and care, and despite several attempts to solve this problem in England, it has proved difficult to agree a single meaningful term to refer to all who work in Early Childhood Education and Care (Andrew 2015) and in some cases the same term (for example

**CONTACT** Cathy Nutbrown  [c.e.nutbrown@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:c.e.nutbrown@sheffield.ac.uk)

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‘teacher’) is used to identify a confusing range of roles with different responsibilities, qualifications and remunerations. In this paper ‘educator’ – the term put forward by the Rumbold Report (1990) is used as a generic to refer to all involved in supporting and encouraging young children’s learning, regardless of their specific roles or qualifications.

### **The early childhood education qualifications crisis**

The crisis of recruitment and retention of early years staff is common across many countries, (Bridges et al. 2011; Ryan and Whitebook 2012; Nutbrown 2018); a lack of coherence and clarity has resulted in many educators feeling dispirited and undervalued. The lack of an agreed nomenclature, and the many different roles, varied expectations, and inequality in pay and working conditions adds to the confusion. Amongst others, telling examples of these conditions include Dalli’s (2011) consideration of the constructions and practices of professionals in New Zealand, and Fenech, Waniganayake, and Fleet (2009) who highlighted the relationship between a shortage of Australian early childhood teachers and their qualifications, and the quality of learning provision for young children.

In England, despite several reports, (DfES 2006; Nutbrown 2012; DfE 2013, 2017; Bonetti and Blanden 2020; Campbell-Barr et al. 2020; Pascal, Bertram, and Cole-Albäck 2020; Social Mobility Commission 2020), and academic commentaries and analyses (Osgood 2009; Nutbrown 2013; Kempton 2014; Barron 2016; Campbell-Barr 2018; Kay et al. 2021) the crisis of qualifications persists (Nuttall et al. 2020); indeed, it is particularly noteworthy that four key reports on qualifications and the workforce were published during 2020 alone, an indication of urgency if more were needed.

Increasing numbers of these reviews, reports, recommendations and surveys point to the need for understanding more explicitly the roles and responsibilities of people working with young children; for proper remuneration for their work; for conditions of service that support them in a challenging job; and for a career structure which enhances retention (Nutbrown 2012; DfE 2017; Akhal 2019; Bonetti 2019, 2020; Social Mobility Commission 2020). Some early childhood educators are leaving their skilled profession for jobs in supermarkets (Akhal 2019); an indictment on our policy makers for lack of action, and a result of lower level qualifications attracting low pay and difficult working conditions.

The recruitment and retention crisis will persist until there is a proper and formal recognition of the stresses, long hours, unequal pay, lack of career structure and recognition, and lack of qualifications that enable educators to develop deep understanding of children’s learning and development. All these factors contribute hugely to the recruitment and retention problems of the workforce, as does the achievement of a representative balance of gender and ethnicity (Nutbrown 2012; Pascal, Bertram, and Cole-Albäck 2020). To reiterate the obvious: good career advice, good support for initial qualifications, suitable pay and conditions of service are essential to addressing the burgeoning crisis in the workforce.

### **Early childhood educators’ qualifications: a framework for change**

There is no doubt that there is a problem to solve here. One way of effecting change is to develop an attractive and accessible way for people to enter the workforce (initially

unqualified for some, possibly via an apprenticeship scheme) and to progress by taking additional qualifications during the course of a career. This would create a system of initial education and continuing professional development where an unqualified apprentice could have the opportunity to progress up a multirooted qualifications 'ladder'. The Social Mobility Commission (2020) recommended that the Westminster government should 'convene an expert group to devise a career strategy for early years professionals working with children aged zero to eight'. Building on the Nutbrown Review (2012) the SMCs report suggested that such a strategy should begin with:

a new training pathway that allows people to start as apprentices and upskill along a clear path all the way through to primary school headship, with opportunities to enter the sector at any point along this development continuum, depending on qualifications and experience (2).

The career and qualifications progression set out in [Figure 1](#), offers an example of how the SMCs recommendations might be realised. Qualified professionals entering the workforce would have ongoing access to CPD and could potentially progress to school headship or other leadership role, or remain at a point in the workforce where they wish to stay.

Taking off from Nutbrown's (2012) recommendations, [Figure 1](#) shows the potential for a continuity and progression model of early years careers. Such a concept of progressive routes within early years work is not new; indeed, some 25 years ago Abbott and Pugh (1998) put forward the notion of a 'qualifications ladder'. The careers and roles in [Figure 1](#) are intended as examples and do not represent the full range of routes and qualifications, but this illustrates potential for progressing in an Early Years career spanning work with children from birth to 8 years and beyond, and with the flexibility to continue to a role with more leadership and responsibility, or remain in a role that provides career satisfaction and commensurate remuneration.

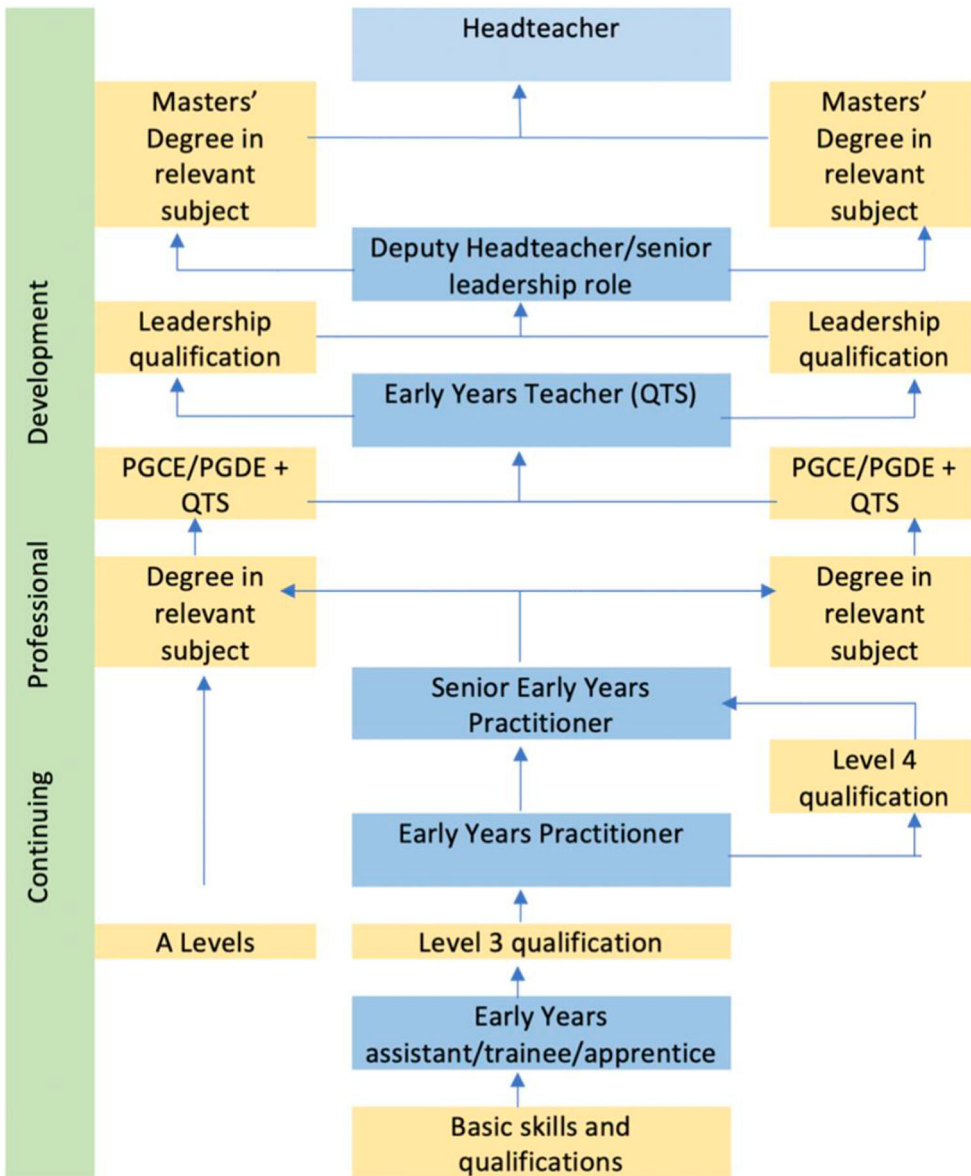
High quality early childhood education relies on well-educated educators who benefit from strong foundational initial education and training and continuing professional development which supports and extends their work throughout their careers. As well as initial, career specific qualifications, high quality continuing professional development for all educators is vital if they are to have a freedom and capacity to be innovative and creative in meeting young children's individual and specific needs. Though most early childhood educators do access some CPD, with approximately 50% having 20 hours of CPD a year (Kalitowski 2018), for many this is lacking and under-resourced (Bonetti 2020).

Qualifications are important because they provide a marker of how educators' learning is achieved and enriched alongside good, supported practical experience and mentoring.

In the next section I will consider *what* educators learn in order to contribute to the work of addressing educational inequalities from the earliest years.

### **Why do qualifications matter?**

It is, of course, one thing to propose a framework for serial, nationally-recognised and properly rewarded qualification in the early years workforce; it is quite another to start to assemble appropriate content which will make explicit the skills, knowledges, attitudes,



**Figure 1.** Early Childhood Education career progression structure and qualifications.

understandings and experiences which would-be educators will need in the work. This is at once a political and a practical matter, and needs to be undertaken with deep moral conviction and ethical commitment.

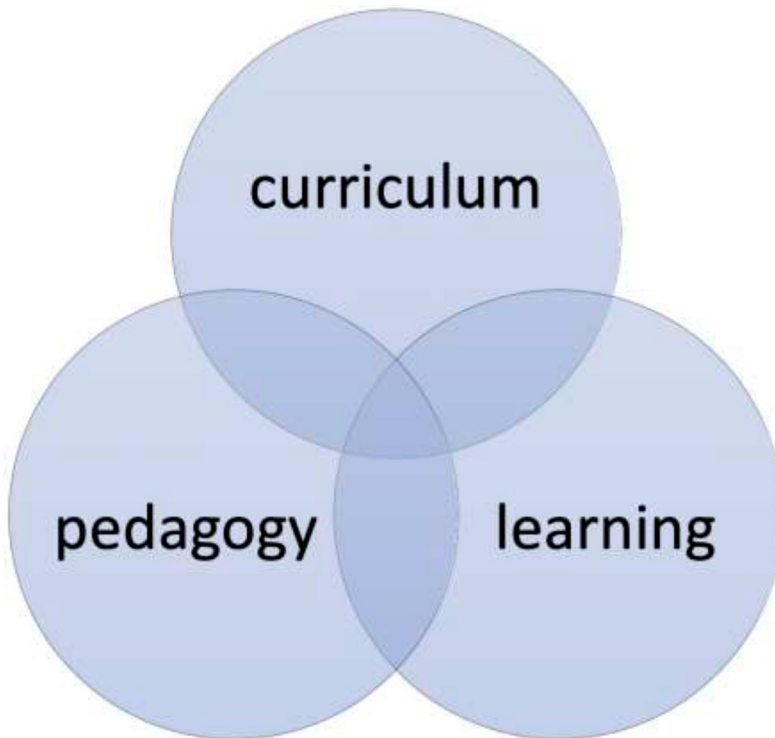
Early childhood education faces an urgency in providing consistency of quality in young children's learning, because too few educators have degree level qualifications with the depth of knowledge, skills and understanding that such qualifications, at their best, can provide. Qualifications are not simply 'a piece of paper' or a 'hoop to jump through' to obtain a particular job-role in early childhood education and care. A

qualification should stand as evidence of what early childhood educators know and can do, and in particular *how* they can support young children's learning through highly attuned practice and thoughtful reflection.

I suggest that qualifications are not so much the means by which educators should know *what to do* in some formulaic way but rather, *how to think* about the situations they face, what they as educators, offer and how they interact with young children in meaningful learning encounters. We know that graduate-educated educators make a difference to children's learning (Mathers et al. 2011, 2014; Sylva et al. 2014; Bonetti and Blanden 2020), and this is likely because acquiring a degree requires, amongst other things, some understanding of theory and critical responses to policy and practice (Campbell-Barr, et al. 2020).

In this section I focus on what happens to bring about learning in early education provision, (setting aside for the moment the other, no less vital theatres of children's learning lives) to focus specifically on what might be seen as 'core' in learning and teaching in the early years. And by understanding what might be seen as 'core' we can better know what prospective educators studying for a qualification in early childhood education might learn.

Everything that I have discussed and proposed in this paper so far rests on a quite particular understanding of two terms, themselves so commonplace that they represent a myriad meaning and use: they are *curriculum* and *pedagogy*; and these themselves take their identity for me from a no less particular understanding of *learning*. These three



**Figure 2.** The Interrelationship between Curriculum, Pedagogy and Learning.

could be represented in a Venn relationship (Figure 2) where none has chronological or substantive precedence over the others and all are mutually interdependent.

In what follows I offer a brief conceptualisation of these three elements, linked with current English policy.

### **Learning**

We take for granted, though this has certainly not always been the case, that learning is life-long, contextual, and social (Vygotsky 1978); it is also specific to individuals, fitful, familial, and it is fair to say that particularly in the case of young children, they are constantly learning. Patterns of learning as Athey (1990) argues derive from children's own individual and persistent concerns and what they learn is influenced by how educators notice and response to those concerns.

For young children, and for much of our lives, learning takes place, to some degree, in company with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky 1978; Smith 1988). We are sociable creatures and we learn with and from others.

Despite its obvious statement, it is still necessary to assert that early education is much more than the mere acquisition of pre-determined facts and knowledge; it is about learning how to use information, to work with others, to hear differing viewpoints and to have the courage, confidence and morality to challenge cruelty and injustice. It is about asking questions, looking for solutions, perseverance, collaboration. We need a fresh interrogation of what is called 'basic' learning so that children are better equipped to face what they encounter in their lives, such that we cannot presume to predict. If we agree that learning and teaching in early childhood education bears these characteristics, we next need to ask how to ensure that those who work with young children, who provide high quality opportunities for rich learning encounters, are educated and supported throughout their careers.

### **Curriculum**

Since its inception in 1995 (SCAA 1995), England's state curriculum for under-fives has been gradually narrowed and more prescribed. What, and now *how* young children should learn has ever-increasing policy emphasis on defined 'basic' skills. Simultaneously, assessment policy has driven curricula into a narrow cul-de-sac of learning opportunity, marginalising play, spontaneity and creativity (Bradbury et al. 2018; Goldstein et al. 2018). Such narrowing of curricula restricts the UNCRC goal that gives children the right to the opportunity to develop 'to the full' (Article 29). If the best interests of children are to be served, they need to experience education which includes space and time to play, relax and create in the company of informed, thoughtful and respectful educators. The limited view of play in the Ofsted (2017) report indicates that 'their fullest' is not the focus of the current English inspection regime. Indeed, England's <sup>1</sup> inspectorate could be viewed as restricting children's opportunities fully to reach their potential, as pedagogical approaches are constrained to serve a narrow curriculum focussed primarily on specific attainments in literacy and numeracy, and teaching approaches tending towards the didactic rather than fluid and child focussed.



Perpetual adjustment of curriculum in England has led to an imbalance of imposed learning, with increasing emphasis on particular aspects of literacy and mathematics dominating. This has had the effect in some instances of a narrowing, risking the neglect of children's holistic development, their well-being, and resilience. Curriculum driven by testing and assessment leads to a lack of balance in learning, a devaluing of crucial elements of learning which are core to developing human beings. In parallel, initial training qualifications which focus too tightly on these features (to the exclusion of other approaches) do a disservice to potential educators who become equipped solely to 'deliver' a particular curriculum. When policy and favoured approaches change, they may be only minimally equipped to respond and adapt to new requirements in curriculum and assessment practices. Campbell-Barr (2018, 75) highlighted this concern, arguing that '... preoccupation with qualification levels silences questions about the knowledge required of ECEC professionals'.

Children, not subjects, should be at the core of any meaningful and effective early childhood curriculum; a curriculum conceived in this way helps ensure that learning opportunities are meaningful, builds on children's own cultural capital, and offers novel experiences which extend the boundaries of learning. Whilst early childhood education in England is increasingly prescribed and related to subjects in the subsequent years of schooling, the room for creativity and responsive curricula is ever diminishing. Learning objectives and 'goals' are set out in prescribed age-phases, and based on preparation for the next phase of education, rather than on children's own, immediate and important interests.

Stenhouse (1975) defined curriculum as:

an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice. (79)

Moving away from predefined objectives, the liberation that Stenhouse provided, was a conception of curriculum that very richly refines these ideas of what learning in the early years might look like. The vitality of Stenhouse's conceptualisation of curriculum principles still stand interrogation and can insightfully illuminate the best of early childhood education practice where educators: *participate* in the elaboration and development of a flexible, open, creative and innovative curriculum, deciding what and how to teach; *research and reflect* on their own actions, increasing understanding of their own practices in order to change them; *critically question* external impositions; *evaluate dynamics* rather than results. Whether they are consciously applied or not, these principles can be found in action in the best of early childhood education settings. And it is these principles that should underpin high quality courses of study leading to qualification to work in early childhood education.

For Stenhouse (1975) 'There is no curriculum development without teacher development' and this underpins the importance of continuing professional development which I argued for earlier and is part of my proposed and qualifications framework (Figure 1). As Nutbrown (2019) argued, young children need well educated educators, and well educated educators maintain a critical disposition to the curriculum they create daily with each child. By contrast, when national governments tightly control curriculum, more fluid ways of learning suffer, and this runs counter to some emerging understandings

of children's means and styles of learning; this is taken up in more detail in the next section.

### **Pedagogy**

When national governments exercise degrees of control over curriculum, freedom to learn in a more fluid ways are restricted. Yet current understandings of children's 'working theories' (Wood and Hedges 2016) and 'funds of knowledge' (Chesworth 2018) offer opportunities for a freer socio-cultural form of learning where young learners bring their own individual riches of questions and understandings to the learning.

The educational experiences offered to young children must be such that they help them to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need as citizens of the world, with all the human understanding and uncertainty which that role, right and responsibility holds. Early education is more than the mere acquisition of pre-determined facts and knowledge, it is about learning how to use information to work with others, to hear differing viewpoints and to have the courage, confidence and morality to challenge cruelty and injustice. It is about asking questions, looking for solutions, perseverance, collaboration. We need a fresh interrogation of what is 'basic' learning so that children are equipped to face whatever they may encounter in their lives.

To take an example from 2020, the death of George Floyd, following his arrest by US police, and the subsequent uprising of #BlackLivesMatter movement, continue to highlight injustice and inequalities. This occurrence brought a warning, yet again, that young children have a right to education which teaches them the importance of social justice and the rights of all people. And this gives them opportunity to ask questions and eventually develop their own decisions about national and global events and issues. Narrow, curricula tightly focussed on specific skills alone (however important those skills are) cannot equip young learners with the necessary moral foundation for the world they will need to face and shape, as young adults; that foundation demands a practice of flexible play-based pedagogy whereby educators draw on their own deep moral knowledge so as to develop work in child-attuned ways, following children's interests and offering new possibilities (Hedges and Cooper 2018).

Here there is a need for balance, and for attention to what are fundamental elements of learning. We need education and care in the early years which teaches children of the importance of belonging, of citizenship, so that the beliefs and values they form in childhood last them for the rest of their lives. We have long known that children can thrive on exploring their own questions (Isaacs 1930; Athey 1990; Hedges 2015; Chesworth 2018) with the support of interested, informed and interacting adults; after all, the children in early years settings today will be living lives that are different from how we live now, and quite possibly doing jobs that no one has yet conceived of.

Sir Alec Clegg, a powerful advocate of child-centred education, differentiated between 'the education of the mind' focussing on facts and skills and 'the education of the spirit' which he identified as 'a child's loves and hates, hopes and fears, or in other terms, their courage, their integrity, their compassion and other great human qualities' (Clegg 1972, 14). Early years educators will best serve children if they develop pedagogies which attend to the young children they teach in all of their essence.

In creating environments to foster children's creative learning there is a balance to strike between creating opportunities for play, exploration and learning, and adult support and involvement. Too much or ill-timed involvement can hinder learning; too intense a desire to hasten change in children's development and purposefulness that decides *for* children rather than *with* children, will not lead to the rewards of strong and healthy holistic development. Educators need to practice a patient and observant pedagogy which fosters a love of learning, whilst also affording new relational opportunities to children when the moment is right. And in this ever-changing world, where borders and boundaries – personal and political – are being challenged and broken and erected, when children with diverse heritages learn together, pedagogy must be appropriately attuned to children's concerns and responses to their experiences. Early childhood educators must have a 'permission' to develop their practice with young children as creative, artistic, imaginative and unconventional.

There have been increasing calls for a pedagogy based around play, as the most effective and meaningful, because it is internal to children and invites adult understanding, (Wood and Hedges 2016). Externally devised, adult driven pedagogical approaches rarely provide appropriate starting points whereas, as Chesworth (2018) observes, 'in-the-moment co-explorations of interests' (7) offer more valuable learning opportunities, extending understanding and skills more deeply. Wood and Hedges (2016) argue for a play-based curriculum and reciprocal, relational pedagogies alongside 'intentional and responsive teaching', (401). Thinking educators can do this, and so qualifications must equip them to hone these complex skills.

A determination to pay attention to children's own interests through practices focussed around a child and their specific thinking concerns is a 'dance' of shared learning encounters. Educators who truly partner children in their play are intrigued by what they see, and trust children as learners and their own skill as teachers in a pedagogical partnership of infinite potential. Such close enquiring interactions between young children and their educators can bring about rich learning.

These views of learning, curriculum and pedagogy come together in the notion of respect. As Nutbrown (2019) observed:

Respectful educators will strive to afford every child equality of opportunity. Not just those who are easy to work with, obliging, endearing, clean, pretty, articulate, capable, but *every* child – respecting them for who they are, respecting their language, their culture, their history, their family, their abilities, their needs, their name, their ways and their very essence. This means understanding and building on their abilities. (54)

## Conclusion: moving forward

Looking back through three decades of policy advice, we can see many iterations of the importance of high quality pedagogy for children. In 1990, the Rumbold Committee noted: 'Working with young children is a demanding and complex task. Those engaged upon it need a range of attributes to assure a high quality of experience'. (para 146)

Such high quality experiences are engendered by skilled, knowledgeable and understanding early years professionals, whose education and qualifications are rooted firmly in theory and a perpetual critique of practice. There has been little, if any,

meaningful progression in the last 30 years; report after report tells us that this issue will not go away until real action, underpinned by sufficient resources, is put in place. In 1990 Rumbold issued a powerful warning:

The status afforded to any group or profession has an important influence on the recognition and support it secures for itself. Yet adults working with the under-fives have traditionally enjoyed less esteem than those working with children of statutory school age, outside and even within the ranks of the professions themselves. This is reflected, in substantial measure, in levels of pay. (para. 150)

We know that poor pay and long working hours deters many from joining, and are prime among the reasons why some are leaving, work with children (Akhil 2019; Bonetti 2019). When Rumbold concluded that ‘... what is now needed is a determined effort to bring greater clarity and coherence across the field of courses and qualifications for workers with under-fives’. (para 154), little could the committee have known that this statement would lose none of its urgency 30 years later, when in the House of Lords in March 2020, Baroness Morris of Yardley, (2020) (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2001–2002), opened a debate on educational opportunities for children and young people from working class backgrounds. The Labour politician spoke thoughtfully on the lack of parity of qualification across age ranges and sectors when she said:

... early years ought to be our prime focus; it ought to be where we put our resources if ever we have the chance. Yet when we look at that area, we see staff who are less qualified. Some 45% of childcare workers claim benefits or tax credits; it is essentially a low-skilled workforce. You have to have a PhD to teach a university student but you do not even have to have a level 3 qualification to teach the nought to fives. So we have learned what is needed but failed to take action.

Westminster debates have highlighted the serious discrepancies which lie at the heart of the issue and again, there are those who repeatedly stress the need to take the necessary action without further delay. In the same debate Baroness Warwick commented on ‘the disappointing decision not to carry out an early workforce feasibility study’ and asked for reassurance that the Government ‘will reconsider, or develop, a workforce strategy for early years as a priority’.

We know that a well-educated, well-qualified workforce is essential to high quality provision which, in turn is crucial in closing the attainment gap and giving young children the best possible opportunities for learning and development (Sylva et al. 2004). Further, a high quality ‘workforce’ is a matter of children’s rights (Nutbrown 2018; Welton, Tinney and Saer, 2019), and fundamental to those rights is universal access in early education, to a workforce that is properly trained and rewarded, valued and respected, and who have themselves, opportunities to learn and think and question.

There is a moral and ethical duty to address the issues of education, qualifications, retention and remuneration of early childhood educators, for the educators themselves and for children. The reluctance of government to act is puzzling and damaging. As Pascal, Bertram, and Cole-Albäck (2020) note, entry requirements and initial training, the qualification system, progression within the profession, and leadership in the sector all need attention and significant investment to bring about effective change.

As to the future, it is by no means clear when – or even if – there will be any meaningful response to the needs identified in this paper. A range of early childhood settings

and schools were identified by government as providers of critical services from the start of the COVID-19 lockdown in England, in March 2020. As settings and schools began to reopen or welcome more children back from June 2020, more early childhood educators faced the need to make radical changes in their practice. They planned for more learning outdoors, re-organised their settings for smaller groups, offered a blend of home – and setting-based learning (Yates 2020), reconsidered what was important in terms of curriculum and assessment. In moving forward we need to find again those important things about children, their learning, and adult interactions which are left when the extraneous, unnecessary trappings of destructive and deficient policy are evaporated. It is time to ensure that qualifications for work in early childhood education enables educators to preserve the unique nature of childhood as they support their learning, and to restore pedagogical balance based on understanding of theory and a critical approach to practice. Those educators who adapted their practice during 2020 did so by drawing on their deep knowledge of how children learn and having the confidence to try new things to fit necessary changes in routines and their environments. We need decent and meaningful policy recognition of the critical roles of those who work with young children, so that from the start and throughout their careers, they are equipped to do their job, given due reward as well as appropriate acclaim.

The problem is at the point of crisis and needs urgent attention. Radical change, political will, and government investment is needed to enact a positive shift; to be effective, any change needs to be resourced, with a properly massive investment in educators' initial introduction to the workforce, and conditions of service which will sustain their retention and enhance their career progression. Whilst policy makers in England appeared to recognise the value of those who make up the early years workforce during a critical global period in 2020-21, without action these are empty words, monoliths of unfulfilled intent. Quite simply, we do not need more reports advising on the continuing need for action; quite simply, we need positive action, without further delay, for our young children *and* their educators.

## Note

1. Each of the four countries of the UK has its own curriculum, therefore the English policy is not the same as those of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

## Disclosure statement

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

## ORCID

Cathy Nutbrown  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6100-7511>

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