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**Early years practitioners’ personal and professional narratives of poverty**

**Abstract**

Early years practitioners are central to UK government policy in alleviating poverty in early childhood. The significant level and rise in child poverty rates suggest that their role is becoming increasingly important in supporting families on low incomes. Paradoxically, cuts to children’s services under austerity policies and the low pay and status associated with working in early years sector means that many practitioners are likely to be vulnerable to poverty themselves.  However, government policy has failed to recognise that practitioners who are charged with supporting families in poverty may at the same time be experiencing in-work poverty themselves. Drawing on a narrative study with 38 early years practitioners in the south-east of England this paper addresses how practitioners’ personal and professional lives shape their understandings of poverty. Findings suggest that practitioners’ personal experiences of childhood, motherhood and personal poverty play a part in shaping their understandings of poverty and to what extent they are able to recognise and empathise with others. It is recommended that how practitioners are positioned and how they position others within discourses of poverty needs to be addressed if practitioners are to effectively support families on low incomes.

# Introduction

Poverty in the UK is at a critical level, as Philip Alston (2018, 1), the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, after his UK visit in November 2018 pointed out:

For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.

The impact of poverty on young children’s lives in the UK is well documented. Children living in families on low incomes perform significantly less well than their more affluent peers in terms of educational attainment and children living in areas of disadvantage are less likely to live long and healthy lives (ONS, 2014; Social Mobility Commission, 2017b). Overall, research suggests that poverty permeates every aspect of children’s lives including the economic, social and relational (Ridge, 2011; 2017).

The political landscape in relation to child poverty in the UK has changed significantly in recent years (Knight, O’Connell and Brannen, 2018). The Labour government’s (1997-2010) pledge to eradicate poverty by 2020 has been abandoned since the repeal and renaming of the Child Poverty Act 2010 as the Life Chances Act in 2016. Post 2010 changes in government triggered the introduction of austerity measures - underpinned by a discourse of neoliberalism - which have delivered a series of spending cuts and privatisation of public services (Jones, 2015; Mendoza, 2015). Cuts to benefits and services have significantly affected children and families (Gillies, 2014; Simpson; 2013).

Universal credit and increased free childcare are examples of policies which were designed to reduce the government deficit and promote work as a way of addressing poverty in childhood. So far these policies have had little impact on child poverty and in many cases have contributed to further debt for families. Universal credit, introduced in 2013, amalgamated several benefits into one, however, long waiting times for payment, sanctions and difficulties with applications has resulted in increased debt for many families (DWP, 2010; DWP, 2019; HCCPA, 2018). 30 hours of free childcare was introduced for families with children aged three to four years in 2017 to support the number of hours parents were able to work (DfE, 2015). However, evidence suggests that families on the lowest incomes are rarely eligible for extended hours and many providers have struggled to offer the entitlement due to the financial viability of the scheme (Paull et al., 2017). Further policies within the Welfare Reform Act 2012, such as, the ‘benefit cap’ (the amount of benefits a family can receive) and the freezing of Child Benefit payments have also contributed to lower incomes for families. Despite the Government’s claims that work is the route out of poverty, in-work poverty has remained significant and continues to rise with government figures reporting that 69% of all children in poverty are living in families where at least one person is working (DWP, 2019). Arguably, low and stagnating wages together with insecure work, such as zero hours contract have also contributed to enduring low incomes for families (ONS, 2018).

In addition to policies which have focused on work as a route out of poverty there has been increased stigmatisation and pathologisation of those in poverty, with parents and parenting particularly effected. The Troubled Families Programme [TFP], introduced in 2012, aimed to address families with ‘multiple problems’, such as, anti-social behaviour, unemployment, truancy and mental health problems. However, the programme has failed to recognise the structural inequalities which contribute to families’ circumstances, such as, low incomes and associated health and housing issues (Levitas, 2012). Instead the programme has identified parents as being responsible for their ‘troubles’ as part of a ‘cycle of deprivation’ caused by individual (ir)responsibility (Boddy et al., 2016). Lister (2015) suggests that such discourses have served to ‘other’ and legitimise the stigmatisation and shaming of those in poverty, thereby, families in poverty, are ‘blamed’ for their own circumstances within a discourse of an “underclass”. Lone mothers are amongst the most vilified members of the “underclass” with negative constructs, such as, the ‘chav mum’, contributing to a dehumanisation of mothers in poverty (Tyler, 2008).

Early childhood education and care [ECEC] has been central to delivering policies to address child poverty. The introduction of Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) in 1997 and Sure Start Children’s Centres (SSCC) in 2002 have served to provide integrated services to families living in the poorest 30% of neighbourhoods in England (Sammons et al., 2015). The core purpose of SSCCs was to ‘improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers’ (DfE, 2013a, 7). Since a change of government in 2010 there has been a move away from a core offer of universal services for young children and families towards a core purpose of targeted services aimed to promote social mobility and reduce child poverty (DfE, 2013). As a result, interventions and provision have increasingly focused on individual children and individual families identified as being in the greatest need rather than addressing structural causes of poverty (Lloyd, 2015). As a consequence of austerity measures cuts were made to both public services and local authority budgets – resulting in a significant reduction in the number of children’s centres due to closures and amalgamations. Overall the changes have had significant impact on children and families – with the number of children accessing centres fallen by an estimated 18% since 2014 (Action for Children, 2019).

Although early years practitioners are part of a government strategy to support children and families in poverty, they are also vulnerable to poverty themselves. The ECEC sector is a low status and highly gendered workforce with many practitioners experiencing low wages (Osgood, 2009; Low Pay Commission, 2016). Moss (2006) argues that an early years workforce on low pay reflects a historic discourse of the ‘substitute mother’, where the only requirement to work with young children is that of ‘maternal instinct’. As Osgood (2005) explains the discourse of the ‘substitute mother’ is based on the assumption that working with young children is an extension of a woman’s natural instinct to mother. Thereby working with young children is constructed as a ‘feminised practice’ and in turn a low status or ‘default’ career (Osgood, 2006; Nutbrown, 2012). Issues for practitioners who are themselves mothers have resulted in tensions between paid work and caring responsibilities – such as, how to achieve a work-life balance and access affordable childcare (McGillivray, 2008; Osgood, 2009). At the same time practitioners have been subject to competing normative middle-class gendered constructs of the ‘good mother’, one who is selfless and available to meet their children’s needs (Miller, 2012). Osgood (2009) argues that government policy does little to address how an early years practitioner who is also a mother, achieves a work-life balance and accesses affordable childcare for her own children.

To address issues associated with low pay and a lack of status, steps have been taken to professionalise the early years sector. Nutbrown’s (2012) review of early years qualifications resulted in an overhaul of early years training and the introduction of the Early Years Educator and the replacement of the Early Years Professional Status with the Early Years Teacher Status [EYTS]. The role of the Early Years Teacher was intended to be that of a change agent, who would raise the standards and lead practice within early years settings (McDowall-Clark, 2012). However, issues associated with a lack of parity between EYTS and Qualified Teacher Status has resulted in a continuing trend of low pay and poor conditions for many practitioners, regardless of being more qualified (Butler, 2017). Despite the challenges for practitioners and settings in professionalising the sector, Osgood (2006) argues that practitioners have the potential to ‘oppose’ and transform the existing order. She suggests they need to embrace a new professionalism, one which recognises both ‘ethics of care’, the importance of caring for children and families, as well as critical reflection, how practitioners are positioned and can be re-positioned. However, despite Osgood’s (2006) aspirations for a new professionalism, there is a downward trend in workforce qualifications and workforce turnover remains high with many practitioners leaving the sector for higher salaries and progression opportunities (NDNA, 2018).

Research about early years practitioners and how they understand poverty in early childhood is rare. Simpson, Lumsden and McDowall-Clark (2015) have conducted the only other study in England which has investigated how practitioners have engaged with policy about poverty in early childhood. The majority of practitioners within their study ‘normalised’ child poverty by constructing the poor as ‘troubled’ and a ‘problem’, rather than offering structural explanations, such as low pay, insecure work and a lack of jobs. They suggested that the practitioners had embodied neoliberal rhetoric, holding the poor individually responsible for their poverty. Applying Lister’s (2004; 2015) concept of ‘othering’ to Simpson, Lumsden and McDowall-Clark’s (2015) study it could be argued that the practitioners had ‘othered’ parents in poverty. Arguably, the ‘othering’ of parents in poverty does three things: firstly, it supports a dominant gendered underclass discourse, in that poor mothers are not capable of being good parents or managing their money (Walkerdine and Lucy, 1989; Gillies, 2006); secondly, it renders structural inequalities invisible; and thirdly, it makes invisible the fact that many practitioners are also on low incomes and may be parents in poverty too. Consequently, the responsibility of the poverty is located with the parents rather than society making it difficult for practitioners to identity with parents in poverty. The present study sought to provide an in-depth exploration of how early years practitioners’ personal and professional experiences shape their understanding of poverty in early childhood. The attention to their personal and professional lives aimed to provide a greater understanding of the tensions and paradoxes between how practitioners have been positioned and how they position families living in poverty.

**Methods**

The study took place in two maintained nursery schools and SSCCs with onsite daycare provision in the south-east of England. Although the south-east is a predominantly affluent area and offers some of the highest skilled and paid jobs, the percentage of children in relative poverty (below 60% of the median income after housing costs) varies widely (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a). Despite being in areas of overall relative affluence, both settings were located in two of the 30% most disadvantaged areas in England (HCEC, 2013).

Overall 38 practitioners participated in the study, all participants took part in focus groups and 16 participants took part in follow-up semi-structured interviews. All participants described themselves as female and all apart from one described themselves as white British. In England 77% of Early Years Practitioners hold at least a level three childcare qualification and 29% have at least a Level six qualification (DfE, 2017). The participants in this study were more highly qualified than the national average with 35 (97%) holding at least a level three professional qualification and 16 (44%) holding a level six qualification or above. Within the sample a wide range of roles were represented - consistent with the types of provision – including teachers (with qualified teacher status), nursery nurses, nursery assistants, family support workers and managers. In contrast to a national trend of high workforce turnover (NDNA, 2018) – most participants, thirty in total, had worked in the ECEC sector for at least six years or more and sixteen had worked in their current setting for over six years.

The theoretical framework was underpinned by social constructionism, ‘that what we know of the world, and ourselves and other objects in the world is constructed (produced) through various discourses and systems of meaning we all reside within’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013:30). In line with this a narrative methodological approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of how practitioners’ narratives of poverty were shaped by their personal and professional experiences. Small stories (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) and I-positions (Buitelaar, 2006) were used to explore how practitioners’ narratives of poverty might (dis)connect with dominant discourses. ‘Small stories’ were conceptualised as ‘interactive engagements’ where participants ‘construct a sense of who they are’, enabling a focus on how characters and the narrator are positioned (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, 385). This enabled an exploration of how understandings were socially constructed through practitioners’ narratives – thus addressing both the local context, the ‘doing’ of the narrative, as well as the wider context. Buitelaar’s (2006) concept of I-positions was used to explore the intersection between practitioners’ personal and professional lives – for example, how a practitioner might talk from both the position of a mother and a worker. The analytical approach developed for the study was termed ‘circles within circles’ consisting of six circles of analysis: transcription; free annotation; levels of positioning; illuminations; mapping to research questions; and co-analysis. The approach afforded a ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ between the different circles providing an in-depth, flexible and rigorous process of analysis - for further explanation please see Author (2018). Ethical approval for the study was granted from the participating Universities and informed consent was gained from all participants and settings. All names used in the article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

**Findings and discussion**

The findings and discussion relate to how the personal and the professional shape early years practitioners’ narratives of poverty. The findings and discussion are organised into three sections: childhood poverty; motherhood and poverty; and personal poverty. Pseudonyms have been used and individual roles have not been revealed in order to protect the identity of the participants.

***Childhood poverty***

Childhood is a vulnerable time in terms of poverty, children bring extra costs to families which are exacerbated by women’s reduced participation in the labour market due to caring responsibilities (Lister, 2004). Unexpected events can add significantly to families’ vulnerability, such as, families who have experienced separation (Webb et al., 2014). A small number of participants, such as Chloe spoke of when they were children and their parents separated:

Chloe: When my parents split up my mum was actually fine ..I think it was my Dad […] he had to move back in with his mum and things like that and when he did get a flat […] it wasn’t like my mum’s house who you know […] well kept and we had this that and the other .. We’d go round there (*to my Dad’s*) […] my brother who’s a bit younger than me he’d say […] I want to go to McDonald’s or something and I could see that the look on my Dad’s face at the thought of having to find […] a fiver or something for two children […] so I was the voice of reason you know, even at six years old, I was like, ‘We don’t need a burger.’

Talking from the I-position of a child, Chloe demonstrates empathy for her father and tries to help conceal his poverty by pretending that she does not want to go to McDonald’s. The way she tries to subvert the demands of her younger brother is reminiscent of Ridge’s (2017) research who found that low-income children are aware of the financial constraints and pressures that their parents experience and try to actively mediate these. When telling a story about her work with families, Chloe demonstrates similar awareness of and sympathy with a father who has also experienced separation. In this story the father gives up his career in medicine to care for his children:

Chloe: He was a single dad, it just suddenly happened, he dropped out of uni […] he was suddenly just a full-time dad and that was what he had to do […] so he used the funding […] he deserved it .. he needed it .. and he was looking for work whilst they were here so that he then had money to get them a better place which was when he got this flat […]

The father in this story is reminiscent of Miller’s (2010) discourse of the ‘good father’, someone who is deserving because he has sacrificed his personal ambitions for those of his children. Later on in her narrative she introduces the father’s new partner:

Chloe: And I said to her about working .. *[she said]* ‘I don’t need to work I’m getting six hundred pound to pay towards the flat’ […] she’s so laid back about it she’s not panicking about everything, the child’s always in brand new Adidas clothes .. she’s always in brand new clothes […] they are not .. hard up in the slightest […] he, bless him, he looks exactly the same, the same trainers that he was wearing four years ago when his first child came here […] and he’s going to work and […] he can never pick them up because he’s always at work.

In contrast to the story about the father, the mother is shamed for ‘choosing’ to live on benefits rather than get a job. Her behaviour (no intention of working), physical appearance (wearing ‘brand new clothes’) resembles Tyler’s (2008) construct of the ‘chav mum’, someone who is welfare dependent; poor at parenting; a consumer of branded goods; and embodies ‘bad or vulgar’ taste (Tyler, 2008, p.21). In contrast to pathologising and shaming discourses of poverty, neither Chloe’s own father or the father she encounters in her professional work are blamed for their circumstances, perhaps suggesting that mothers who choose not to work are more likely to be stigmatised than fathers. Her small stories reveal the complexity of early years practitioners’ narratives and how gendered understandings of poverty may construct fathers as more ‘deserving’ than mothers. Overall they illustrate how simple understanding of poverty are limited in helping to understand the complexity of ‘in-family’ life.

***Motherhood and poverty***

As highlighted by Osgood (2005) government policy does not address how mothers who are early years practitioners achieve a work-life balance and access affordable childcare for their own children. Over half of the participants (nine out of 16) were mothers - their narratives revealed tensions between motherhood and work and how high childcare costs, low pay and precarious work make them more vulnerable to low incomes. These tensions were addressed in different ways – such as, demonstrating financial affordance and constraint (for example, working long hours or doing without); and demonstrating moral constraint (for example, decisions around having children).

*I only have one child*

The following small story, told by Diana, conveys how her concerns about keeping her family financially stable resulted in the decision to have only one child:

Diana: I only have one child […] because we made the decision that I needed to go back to work and actually child care and also our housing meant that we weren’t in a position to have any more and we made that decision ourselves to keep ourselves stable […] I then see families with lots and lots of children and really struggling and I […] can understand why they would want these children because […] the joy that they bring you is incredible […] I suppose there is part of me that just thinks **maybe** you could have made slightly different choices but they’ve made their own choices that’s down to them they […] live with that day in day out and *(it’s)* not my job to ever tell anybody that.

Diana compares her personal decision to have only one child with the families she works with. On the one hand, she makes a moral judgement about families with ‘lots of children’, by contesting that - ‘maybe you could have made slightly different choices’ - perhaps suggesting that having a large number of children is financially irresponsible. However, on the other hand, she imagines the social and emotional affordances a larger family has over having one child, such as the ‘love and joy’ of a large family. Overall her small story reflects a morality of restraint - making a decision to have only one child to avoid financial risk. She positions herself as a ‘good mother’, caring for her child as well as working and contributing financially. However, at the same time, her story suggests a personal sadness and regret arising from the decision to have only one child. The irony of her story is perhaps how it links to Osgood’s (2005) analysis of the ‘substitute mother’ and the intersection between the professional and the personal. Professionally, Diana positions herself as serving the needs of the mother in poverty (who might have demonstrated moral restraint by having less children), whilst at the same time, making a personal sacrifice to only having one child.

*Precarious work*

Heather worked in a Children’s Centre which experienced a restructure a few years ago due to budget cuts. In her small story she talks about how the restructure affected her:

Heather [I] wasn’t very happy to begin with because […] it was a demotion down a level […] I had a pay cut .. but it was gradual […] they staggered it […] and then they did another restructure three years later […] I went for my job because […] actually I’m quite happy where I am […] so some of it I chose to do, some of it somebody else got me in to do […] but actually it’s worked out for the better […] So .. yeah. I’ve done lots *[laughs]* […] for about five years I did two jobs. I worked in a nightclub, some pubs as well as working full-time […] as a nursery nurse. [....] just so that I could get extra cash and that’s how I bought my property. I worked seven days a week. […] I’m a hard grafter *[chuckles].*

Despite experiencing less pay and a different job as a result of the restructure Heather describes herself as ‘quite happy where I am’. The challenges faced in trying to save up enough money to buy her own home resonate with the low pay of women working in childcare (LPC, 2016). Her comments about being a ‘hard grafter’ (hard worker) and working ‘two jobs’ to buy her own home further reflects the challenges for early years practitioners buying a house in the South-east of England where prices are high. Reminiscent of a meritocratic discourse, where individuals are awarded according to merit, Heather suggests that her hard work has been rewarded, however, structural inequalities, such as low pay and gender inequality go uncontested.

Heather’s small story resonates with other early years practitioners’ narratives, about mothers on low incomes. Millar and Ridge (2013) highlight how lone working mothers on low incomes are disadvantaged by childcare policy and employment opportunities. In addition, for those living in private rentals the risk of poverty is significantly increased (Marsh et al., 2017). Some of these issues were reflected in Christina’s small story about a lone parent who works long hours:

Christina: We’ve got a little boy in nursery school […] and he attends eight to six and mum’s a lone parent and has been since she was young and she […] also works a Saturday and takes him with her […] and she was able to rent a place on her own for a while and just the cost got too much and she ended up getting in debt and so she’s ended having to move in with her parents who are quite begrudging about it […] cos they’re living in a […] tiny house […] I mean this is a women who obviously works so much and she […] just can’t do it .. I mean the fees of nursery are .. ridiculous.

Christina’s small story challenges a government discourse of ‘work always pays’ [DWP, 2010]- although the mother works six days a week she still ends up in debt. Christina highlights how issues of high childcare costs and high housing costs can result in homelessness. In contrast to stigmatising discourses of the lone mother, such as the ‘chav mum’ (as discussed by Tyler, 2008), the mother is constructed as hard working yet disadvantaged by structural inequalities. Overall the story supports the findings of Millar and Ridge (2013) and the difficulties for working lone parents on low incomes.

***Personal Poverty***

Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) found that those in poverty avoid using the language of poverty in relation to their own experiences because of associations with shame and stigma. Cognisant of this many of the participants talked about financial restraint at different points in their lives but rarely referred to themselves as being ‘poor’ or living ‘in poverty’. Audrey’s narrative was particularly illuminating as she had experience as a mother of being homeless and living on benefits as well as working. She talked about her experience of living in a hostel for homeless people:

Audrey: We’ve been homeless .. we’ve been on benefits you know […] but at no point did I think my children are poverty stricken […] because you know although it was a care hostel accommodation we provided a roof over our head, we provided three meals a day, the children had clothes .. so to me my children might have been disadvantaged but I wouldn’t say they were living in poverty I would have been really offended by that because you know as a person I didn’t really think that was what our lives were about whereas […] a lot of […] families probably do see themselves as living in poverty because there’s no end to that .. there’s no I’m going to get a job or when things get better […]

On the one hand, Audrey distances herself from the shame and stigma of the language of poverty by suggesting that her children were ‘disadvantaged’ rather than ‘poverty stricken’ and constructing herself as a ‘good mother’ providing for her children. However, on the other hand, she makes a distinction between what can and cannot be counted as poverty by suggesting that poverty is ongoing (‘where’s there’s no end’) and a lack of hope (‘there’s no I’m going to get a job or when things get better’). The distinction Audrey makes between herself and others in poverty is consistent with Chase and Walker’s (2012, 752) findings that those who are vulnerable to poverty, to avoid shame and stigma, distance themselves from the label by passing it to ‘others’.

Ridge (2011, 76) highlights how poverty in childhood ‘extracts a high emotional toll on children trying to “fit in” and “join in” with their peers’, for example, children at school are particularly worried about being viewed as different and bullied. Drawing on her I-position as a mother, Audrey talks about non-uniform day:

Audrey: You know, when I was on benefits and my kids were at school, I used to feel like if they had a non-uniform day, I had to go out and buy my kids new clothes… and leave myself really short for the rest of the week .. ‘cause I used to think, ‘I don’t want everyone looking at my kids thinking we’re tramps. I don’t want everyone judging me and thinking that I don’t look after my kids ’cause I haven’t got a job’, and I don’t feel the need to do that *[now]* because I don’t feel that everyone’s judging us. So, you know, if it’s non-uniform day, my kids get whatever’s clean *[chuckles]* really […] Whereas when I was on benefits I felt really judged and I felt crap about myself. […] So it’s not the money, it’s that self-esteem… and how they perceive themselves and how other people perceive themselves …people look at me and think, ‘Oh she’s got a job, she’s got a nice family.’ People look at someone else who might not have a completely different budget to me and think ‘Well look at them. They’re on the dole. They don’t work’ or ‘Look, they’re not looking after the kids properly.’

In this small story, Audrey draws on a discourse of the ‘good mother’, one who is putting her children first and trying to protect both herself and her children from judgement and shaming by buying her children new clothes for non-uniform day. Her experience is reminiscent of Chase and Walker’s (2012) study and the importance those in poverty attach to ‘keeping up appearances’. At the end of the small story Audrey comments on how, as a working parent, she ‘no longer feels judged’ and it no longer matters what her children wear as long as it is ‘clean’. As she points out, poverty is not only about ‘the money’– as despite having a job Audrey suggests she is no better off than a family on benefits. Here her comments reflect Townsend’s (1979) understanding of the subjective experience of poverty, that is, the extent to which an individual may feel they belong in a society. On the one hand her story serves to challenge an underclass discourse, by illuminating how families on benefits are shamed and constructed as inadequate parents. On the other hand, her story reveals how ‘work’ might not afford financial advantage but serves to provide moral acceptance.

Within Audrey’s narrative there is a strong synergy between the way she describes her personal experiences and the way she describes the experiences families she works with. In another small story she talks about why a mother might go without food in order to buy her child an iphone:

Audrey: And it’s not ‘cause, you know, they’re on the fiddle or because benefits is the life of... […] It’s because they feel the need to fit in with everybody else. Because people talk to them like they’re crap and people look down on them. It’s almost that having the need to have things to represent their family. ‘Well look, my child’s not gonna be left out. My child’s going to school with an iPhone.’ […] No-one can say I’m not a good mum. My kid’s got everything he’s ever asked for.’ […] But that fam- that mum might go without food to pay that bill.

In a similar way to her own experience of non-uniform day she empathises with the mother who wants her children to ‘fit in’ to avoid the shame and stigma of poverty. In both stories Audrey constructs the mothers as being judged for living on benefits and not being ‘good mothers’. To try and ameliorate the shame and stigma both mothers make financial sacrifices so that their children can ‘fit in’ resulting in Audrey leaving herself short of money for the rest of the week and the other mother going without food.

An analysis of practitioners’ small stories illuminates how early years practitioners personal

and professional lives affords a greater understanding about the tensions and paradoxes between how practitioners position themselves and how they position the families they work with. Paradoxically, early years practitioners are part of a government strategy to alleviate poverty in early childhood, whilst at the same time, part of a workforce which is highly gendered and to a large extent characterised by low pay, poor working conditions and low status (Osgood, 2009; Low Pay Commission, 2016). Although accounts of practitioners’ personal poverty, such as Audrey, were rare, these highlighted the emotional experience of poverty - the process of shaming and challenges of everyday life. These accounts served to contest stigmatising discourses of poverty as well as recognising the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. Paradoxically, the same participants were careful to distance themselves from poverty both through avoiding the label of ‘poverty’ and the process ‘othering’. Although Audrey had been homeless and lived on benefits she was careful to explain that her family were not in poverty, unlike other families who might experience ongoing poverty. In addition, practitioners were more likely to position themselves within neoliberal and normative middle-class discourses, (such as taking individual responsibility and ‘being the right kind of [middle class] self’ as discussed by Gillies (2005, 837). For example, Diana positions herself within a middle-class normative discourse of being a ‘good mother’, both caring for her child as well as working and contributing financially to the family. Lastly, practitioners’ childhood experiences of poverty, such as, Chloe’s experience of her parents’ separation and the resulting financial constraints experienced by her father, perhaps provide particular empathy for families who had experienced similar situations to themselves.

**Conclusion**

Paradoxes and tensions were strongly evidenced in the narratives of the early years practitioners who took part in the study. However, this is not something which has been recognised or addressed within government policy. Although policy states that the government is committed to investing and valuing early years practitioners (DfE, 2017), attempts to professionalise the early years sector have met with limited success. Most practitioners remain qualified to a low level and staff turnover within the sector continues to be high, largely due to issues of low pay, progression and access to affordable and accessible training (DfE, 2017b; NDNA, 2016). This suggests that simplistic explanations are insufficient at explaining how practitioners might understand poverty in early childhood. Osgood’s (2006) discourse of the ‘new professionalism’, suggests that it is possible for practitioners to ‘oppose’ and transform policy through critical reflection on the social and political context within which they are positioned and how they can be re-positioned. Giving practitioners ‘spaces’ where they can critically reflect on their professional and personal lives and how these might ‘shape’ and ‘be shaped’ by dominant discourses may create opportunities for them to work as ‘new professionals’, such as effecting change through enabling new alternative discourses of poverty. Arguably, universities providing training courses and ECEC providers need to be looking at other ways they can engage with both early years practitioners and government to bring about positive change for those working in the early years sector and to give more attention to how support families living in poverty. A positive way forward is recognising the power of narratives and providing open platforms within local early years networks where early years practitioners can share their stories and their voices be heard.

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