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Fogarty, L and Hoyes, S. (2026) *Rewriting professionalism in early childhood education and care: A call to collective agency*. Power and Education. ISSN 1757-7438

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Rewriting professionalism in early childhood education and care: A call to collective agency

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals in England operate within a system that persistently undermines their status, voice, and agency. This conceptual paper, informed by prior empirical research, introduces a new conceptual framework positioning *professional confidence* as a driver of change from within the sector. Building on Miller's analysis of system conditions that constrain professional identity and autonomy (2019; 2021), it reframes confidence not as an individual trait but as a relational, collective force. The conceptual framework identifies five interconnected components – awareness, positive action, skilful advocacy, collective action, and purposeful passion – through which practitioners can exercise meritocratic agency and challenge externally imposed definitions of professionalism. By situating confidence within the broader system architecture, the paper highlights how professional self-definition and sector-led leadership can begin to reshape institutional cultures. It concludes with a call to action for leaders, policymakers, and practitioners to co-create an empowered and self-determining profession.

Keywords

professionalism, early childhood education and care, professional confidence, leadership, collective action, early years

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals in England continue to navigate a system in which low occupational status, restrictive policy environments, and limited professional voice converge to undermine their agency and identity (Bamsey and Fogarty, 2025; Early Education, 2025a). Despite the sector's critical contribution to children's learning and social outcomes, practitioners frequently operate within structures that position them as recipients, rather than authors, of professionalism, with external control, accountability mechanisms, and cultural narratives shaping what it means to be a professional in early childhood (Kay et al., 2021; McDowall Clark, 2022; Moss, 2006; Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Vincent and Braun, 2011). This context reflects a wider pattern of what Miller (2021) refers to as system failure, where institutional arrangements, cultural norms, and policy discourses systematically constrain progression, recognition, and influence within the workforce.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to these challenges by offering a sector-specific conceptual framework that clarifies how professional confidence can act as a catalyst for change from within the profession. The framework is grounded in empirical insights

from Fogarty's original research exploring insider perspectives on leadership across varying organisational contexts through experience-centred narrative research (Fogarty, 2024). While these empirical foundations inform the design of the framework, this paper does not report on the original research; instead, the focus here is on articulating the framework itself, its conceptual foundations, and its implications for practice, leadership, and policy.

Rather than presenting wholly new theoretical constructs, the paper integrates established scholarship, most notably Miller's work on progression barriers and system conditions (2019; 2021), to underpin the framework conceptually alongside these empirical insights into professional confidence (Fogarty, 2024). In the study, practitioners' narratives revealed recurring patterns in how confidence was experienced, developed, and enacted in practice, particularly in relation to navigating structural constraints and exercising agency. These patterns informed the inductive identification of five interrelated components of professional confidence, which are subsequently elaborated and extended here into a conceptual framework. In doing so, the paper argues that transformation is not the work of a few high-profile leaders, nor is it achieved solely through top-down reform. It is the cumulative, compounding effect of many individuals and teams choosing to lead from where they are, in ways that challenge and reframe the conditions of their work. The conceptual framework presented here provides theorisation tailored to the ECEC context, where systemic undervaluation and fragmented professional identities are persistent concerns, alongside an operationalisation of how this professionalism can be enacted, negotiated, and strengthened in practice.

The article is structured as follows: first, it examines the current landscape of system failure in ECEC, mapping Miller's (2021) four system conditions onto contemporary policy, funding, cultural attitudes, and public discourse. This is followed by a discussion of professional confidence as a framework for agency and growth. The conceptual framework is then introduced, explaining how professional confidence operates across individual, organisational, and system levels. Empirical illustrations are presented to demonstrate how practitioners enact the components of the framework in their daily work, showing how confidence develops and how inclusive, bottom-up leadership can serve as a vehicle for change. The paper concludes with a call to action for leaders, policymakers, and practitioners to co-create conditions in which professional confidence can flourish, strengthening the profession's capacity to define itself and influence the system from within, and ultimately enhance the lives and futures of the children it serves.

Understanding the current landscape

Miller's (2019, 2021) work offers a compelling lens for understanding how systemic conditions influence the progression and agency of marginalised groups in education.

Although his conceptual model was originally developed to explore the racialised barriers facing Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) teachers in England, this paper builds on and adapts Miller's system conditions framework to explore another social justice issue: the persistent marginalisation of ECEC professionals. While the specific focus differs, both contexts share a concern with how entrenched power structures, dominant narratives, and policy environments shape professional identities and limit collective advancement. By applying Miller's model to ECEC, this paper acknowledges the transferability of systems-thinking approaches to different axes of inequality and highlights the need for contextualised responses that foreground the agency of practitioners navigating these constraints.

In his study on BAME teacher progression in England (2019), Miller identified a constellation of barriers, including discriminatory recruitment and promotion practices, restricted access to developmental opportunities, and organisational cultures that marginalise voices outside the dominant group. His later work deepens this analysis, situating these barriers within a wider context of structural racism and entrenched inequality (Miller, 2021). These system conditions present as four interrelated factors that must be aligned for anti-racism efforts to be effective. These four conditions are as follows:

- (i) laws and policies;
- (ii) statements of state representatives and public figures;
- (iii) national cultural values and attitudes; and
- (iv) funding (Miller, 2021: 2).

To understand these discussions further, this section considers why professionalism matters and how system conditions shape it, before offering examples of how these system conditions can create system failure and constrain professionalism within the ECEC sector.

System failure and professional voicelessness

Professionalism matters, especially for young children. Differing constructions of professionalism shape practitioners' confidence, competence, and capacity to exercise judgement (Osgood, 2012). A robust, values-driven professionalism therefore provides the foundation for practitioners to exercise judgement, respond to children's needs, and sustain a strong professional identity amid competing demands (Hoskins and Smedley, 2020). Yet the extent to which such professionalism can flourish is profoundly shaped by the wider system in which practitioners work. While internal, sector-defined professionalism can support confidence and agency, these qualities are continually negotiated within structural, cultural, and political environments that may constrain or even contradict them (Osgood, 2006; Simpson 2010; Taggart, 2015). This tension

between what professionalism *could* enable and what the system *actually* permits creates a critical fault line in ECEC practice.

Miller's (2019, 2021) work on system conditions provides a powerful framework for understanding how these wider forces operate. Although his primary focus is racial injustice in education, the patterns he identifies resonate strongly with the ECEC sector. While the marginalisation in ECEC is not primarily racialised, though racial inequities do exist, it is deeply embedded in occupational status, gendered assumptions, and systemic undervaluing of the profession (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016; Urban, 2010). The ECEC literature describes a sector operating within a regime of externally defined professionalism (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Osgood, 2006), in which practitioners' professional knowledge is subordinated to prescriptive frameworks and narrow accountability measures (Archer, 2021; Urban, 2010). This configuration reflects not isolated policy decisions but a patterned alignment of system conditions, laws and policies, funding regimes, public narratives, and cultural attitudes, that collectively delimit professional autonomy. In this sense, the *current state* of ECEC is not merely one of low status, but one of structurally constrained agency with limited autonomy, trust, and career progression.

Just as Miller documents the absence of voice for BAME teachers within decision-making arenas, ECEC scholars highlight a professional voicelessness sustained by policy cultures that fail to engage practitioners meaningfully in shaping the standards by which they are judged (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016; Sims and Waniganayake, 2015). The result is a workforce tasked with implementing directives rather than co-constructing them, producing a de-professionalisation effect despite the rhetoric of professionalism (Oberhuemer, 2005). This paradox, where the label of professional is applied without the corresponding agency, authority, or reward, is a hallmark of system failure in both Miller's (2021) and the ECEC contexts.

The injustice at the heart of Miller's (2021) critique, namely, the denial of equitable access to influence, recognition, and progression, is therefore not confined to questions of race, but is symptomatic of a broader issue: systems designed, often inadvertently, to preserve the status quo and silence those at the margins. In ECEC, this manifests in chronic undervaluing, insufficient pay, minimal career progression, and an absence of practitioner-led policymaking (Early Education, 2025a; Nutbrown, 2012). These systemic patterns are sustained not only by structural arrangements but also by cultural narratives that normalise them, whether that is the assumption that BAME teachers are less suited to leadership roles, or the perception that early years practitioners are engaged in low-skilled care work rather than complex pedagogical practice (Simpson, 2010; Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

Understanding the ECEC sector through the lens of Miller's system conditions highlights that what is often framed as individual underperformance or lack of ambition is, in

reality, structurally produced voicelessness. It also underscores the need for approaches that address both the internal capacity of practitioners to lead change and the external structures that either enable or suppress that capacity. This dual focus underpins the conceptual framework introduced later in this paper, which reframes professional confidence not as a personal trait but as a collective and systemic driver of transformation.

Mapping system failure to the ECEC context

The following sub-sections examine each system condition in turn, drawing on selected examples of recent policy developments, sector literature, and public discourse to illustrate their current impact on ECEC in England. This is not an exhaustive analysis; rather, it provides specific examples that demonstrate how structural conditions have shaped ECEC professionalism and practice.

i) Laws and Policies

In England, the ECEC sector has undergone significant transformation since 1997 (Campbell-Barr, 2019). While some areas have received intensive policy attention, for example, statutory curricula and funding (Department for Education, 2024; Gov.uk, 2023), others have faced prolonged neglect. Workforce development is a clear example: prior to the recent Labour Government strategy ‘Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life’ (Department for Education, 2025c), there had been little substantive policy discussion on raising qualification levels beyond Level 3 since 2011 in England. The Graduate Leader Fund (2007–2011) remains the last major effort to upskill the workforce (Bonetti, 2020). Since its discontinuation, qualification levels have continued to erode, with no robust funding or systemic support (Bonetti, 2020). Consequently, the ECEC workforce across the UK is characterised by fragmented qualification frameworks, low pay, limited career progression, and diminished professional status (Early Education, 2025a).

The Labour Government’s Best Start in Life strategy (Department for Education, 2025c) outlines commitments to expand the early years teacher workforce, address recruitment and retention, and create new pathways into the sector, supported by £400 million of funding. However, elements of the strategy remain unclear and, in some cases, introduce new complexities. For example, the proposed ‘faster assessment-only route’ to Level 3 recognition (Department for Education, 2025c: 42) reflects a tendency for policy makers to ‘trade up’ qualifications with minimal disruption, without fully interrogating the appropriateness of the underpinning knowledge base (Cameron and Miller, 2016: 104).

Unlike established professions such as medicine or law, which possess long-standing academic and professional heritage (Mason, 2016), ECEC is a comparatively young profession that has evolved alongside, and often in response to, government rhetoric. Defining what it means to be an ECEC professional within such a fast-moving and

uneven policy landscape is challenging. As Campbell-Barr (2019: 13) argues, ECEC professionals risk becoming ‘policy objects’, shaped and reshaped by shifting political priorities. More broadly, the sector’s complexity, its diversity of provision, particularly Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) and school-based provision, qualifications, and organisational structures, creates inconsistencies that influence discourses of professionalism and perceptions of quality (Sakr and Bonetti, 2021).

ii) Statements of State Representatives and Public Figures

The tone set by central government significantly shapes public understanding and sector identity. At present, two dominant discourses are especially influential: the positioning of ECEC as primarily for economic need, and the prioritisation of a school readiness agenda (Moss, 2025). These are enacted through increased division between the PVI sector and school-based provision, reinforcing the education–care divide (Early Education, 2025a).

In the Spring Budget 2023, the then Conservative Chancellor framed childcare expansion largely as a labour market intervention aimed at ‘remov [ing] the barriers to work’ (Hunt, 2023). This framing positions ECEC as childcare and devalues the educational and pedagogical dimensions by centring economic productivity over children’s learning. Additionally, this need for more places also focuses on quantity as opposed to quality (Vandenbroeck et al., 2016).

Government messaging has also continued to prioritise school-based provision. This is evident in the strategy to create an additional 6000 school-based nursery places from September 2025, and the positioning of Early Years Teachers as the gold standard (Department for Education, 2025c). Recent media campaigns, aimed directly at parents, further emphasise the convenience of school-based settings, such as promoting the benefit of ‘one drop-off point’ for parents (Department for Education, 2026). Such statements and campaigns reinforce the education–care divide and risk diminishing the legitimacy of PVI provision and the professionals who work within it. This creates a workforce perceived as a ‘lesser counterpart to teaching in primary or secondary schools’ (Early Education, 2025b: 4), deepening what Moss (2006: 31) describes as the ‘fault line’ between the two sectors.

iii) National Cultural Values and Attitudes

National cultural values surrounding early childhood work play a significant role in shaping perceptions of professional status and opportunities for progression. Longstanding narratives position ECEC as women’s work and therefore inherently low skilled, drawing on maternalist assumptions that caring for young children is intuitive rather than pedagogical (McDowall Clark, 2022; Osgood, 2010; Quon et al., 2025). These cultural assumptions contribute to the persistent public confusion, evident in

recent attitudes research (Department for Education, 2025b), about what constitutes quality and who is qualified to deliver it.

The disparate and often marketised landscape of ECEC provision is further entangled with neoliberalism, as public and private services must compete, and parents are positioned as consumers (Cameron and Moss, 2020). This shifts the perception of ECEC from a social good to a market commodity. Meanwhile, media discourses frequently amplify deficit narratives of crisis, instability, and low standards (Gaunt, 2023; Grierson and Bland, 2024; Ofsted, 2023; Oppenheim, 2023). Collectively, these narratives overshadow the relational and pedagogical complexity of early childhood practice and form a powerful system condition that limits recognition of ECEC as a knowledge-rich, skilled profession.

iv) Funding

Funding is complex. As discussed above, the recent expansion of funded entitlements (2024–2025) is underpinned by a new national funding formula and published hourly rates (Department for Education, 2025a). However, sector surveys and journalism describe the lived consequences of these funding decisions, including low pay, retention difficulties, financial instability, closures, and limited availability of places (Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023; Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Funding disparities between school-based and PVI settings further widen inequalities in pay, progression opportunities, professional recognition, and working conditions (Early Education, 2025a). Additionally, funding for workforce development in England, prior to the new but still unclear Best Start in Life strategy (Department for Education, 2025c), has been absent since the early 2010s (Bonetti, 2020). This sustained lack of investment presents further challenges and entrenches the structural undervaluation of the workforce.

Summary

Taken together, these four system conditions converge to create a challenging and often inequitable landscape for ECEC professionals, particularly those in the PVI sector. These examples illustrate how practitioners operate within a climate where their professional knowledge is undervalued, their leadership potential constrained, and their capacity to influence the system from within significantly curtailed.

These misalignments weaken organisational processes, marginalise practitioner expertise, and shape the everyday experiences of the workforce. As Miller (2021) argues, the result is system failure. Although the mechanisms differ, in ECEC, they centre on marketisation, gendered assumptions, and occupational status (Early Education, 2025a; McDowall Clark, 2022), the patterns mirror those documented in Miller's (2019) studies of racial inequality in education. In both contexts, gatekeeping,

compliance cultures, and limited progression pathways are sustained through entrenched institutional habits, procedures, and ideologies.

Drawing on Miller's notion of 'institutional habitus': the structures, practices, and cultures that shape institutional life (Miller, 2019:), professional voicelessness emerges not as a byproduct of individual shortcomings but as a systemic feature of how the sector is organised. Recognising these conditions provides the foundation for the conceptual framework that follows, where developing professional confidence becomes the first step toward building the capacity to lead change from within the system.

Professional confidence: A construct of internal agency and growth

Professional confidence is the belief individuals hold in their competence, agency, and professional worth, even within unsupportive or limiting environments (Study 1, 2024). It is not a static trait, but rather a developmental construct that evolves through a combination of personal awareness, professional growth, and context-sensitive action, providing a foundation for voice, advocacy, and change-making.

As explored in detail in Study 1 (2024), professional confidence unfolds through five progressive, interrelated components. While the five components emerged inductively, they resonate with established scholarship on teacher agency, professional identity, and democratic professionalism, as outlined below:

1. Awareness – recognising one's strengths, contributions, and potential for influence.

This component aligns with self-efficacy theory, which positions belief in one's capability as a precursor to agentic action (Bandura, 1997). Awareness therefore represents the cognitive foundation of professional agency, the recognition that one's judgement and contribution matter within practice contexts.

2. Positive Action – taking initiative in day-to-day practice that aligns with one's values.

This reflects the ecological conception of teacher agency advanced by Biesta et al. (2015), which argues that agency is not possessed but achieved through action within structural constraints. Positive action therefore represents agency-in-practice, the practical-evaluative dimension of professional judgement.

3. Skilful Advocacy – communicating and negotiating effectively to influence others.

This resonates with notions of democratic professionalism (Sachs, 2001), in which professionals exercise informed voice and influence in shaping practice and policy. Skilful Advocacy reflects the movement from internal confidence to outward professional participation.

4. Collective Action – collaborating with peers to shift cultural norms and practices.

This aligns with Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, which conceptualises professional identity and transformation as socially negotiated. Collective action represents the transition from individual agency to shared, practice-shaping participation.

5. Purposeful Passion – sustaining energy and direction through a deep belief in the work's value.

This reflects the role of moral purpose in sustaining professional commitment under pressure (Day, 2004). Purposeful passion therefore represents the ethical and identity-based dimension of professional confidence that enables resilience.

Together, these components comprise a framework for meritocratic agency (Miller, 2019), a means through which practitioners can assert their professionalism from within, rather than waiting for it to be conferred externally.

The conceptual framework advanced in this paper synthesises both internal and external dimensions of professionalism. Professional confidence represents the internal, developmental journey of the practitioner, while Miller's system conditions represent the external, structural forces shaping that journey. The framework proposes that professional confidence can be fostered even when system conditions are constraining, and that confidence becomes transformational when it feeds into collective action capable of challenging and reshaping those very conditions.

In this way, the framework shifts the narrative from one of waiting for recognition to one of self-definition and sector-led change. By drawing on Miller's systems-thinking approach and adapting it to the unique context of ECEC, the framework provides both a conceptual grounding and a practical pathway toward a more empowered, agency-rich profession. Importantly, this framework brings into direct relationship the system conditions outlined above and the development of professional confidence, showing how practitioner agency is both shaped by and capable of responding to these structural constraints. The next section introduces the framework in detail.

The conceptual framework

This section introduces the conceptual framework underpinning the paper. Figure 1 illustrates how professional confidence and its five components operate in relation to the system conditions outlined above.

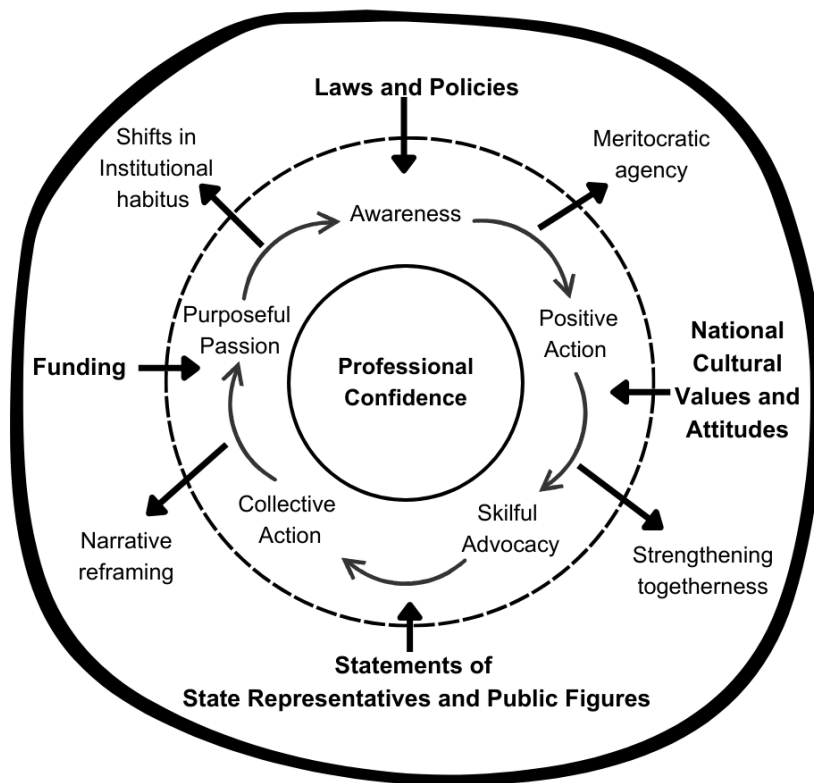


Figure 1. Professional confidence and system conditions in ECEC.

Figure 1 is intentionally designed to reject a linear journey to a desired state and instead depict professionalism in ECEC as an ongoing dynamic relationship between system conditions and professional confidence. The irregular outer boundary represents historically patterned system conditions, laws, and policies; statements of state representatives and public figures; national cultural values and attitudes; and funding, whose uneven shape signifies accumulated structural weight, asymmetries of power, and the non-neutral nature of the field within which practitioners operate. The inward arrows from this boundary visually signal that these conditions actively shape, constrain, and pattern professional identity and confidence, rather than merely contextualising it. At the centre, professional confidence is deliberately enclosed within the system field to emphasise that competence, agency, and professional worth develop (or not), inside constraint, not outside it.

The circular arrangement of the five capacities: awareness positive action, skilful advocacy, collective action, and purposeful passion, avoids hierarchical stacking and instead conveys iteration, reinforcement, and developmental cycling. The outward arrows emerging particularly from collective action and purposeful passion illustrate the shift from individual meritocratic agency to attempts at institutional habitus change,

signalling that transformation requires amplification beyond the individual. Finally, the dashed line at the boundary between system conditions and professional confidence underscores that system reconfiguration is neither guaranteed nor absolute but continuously negotiated.

Figure 1 reconceptualises professionalism in ECEC as a dynamic site of power, constituted through the ongoing interaction between structurally embedded system conditions and practitioner agency. Drawing on Miller's (2019, 2021) theorisation of system conditions and institutional habitus, the model positions these four conditions not as neutral contextual variables but as mechanisms through which professional identities are shaped, regulated, and hierarchised. These conditions structure the field within which ECEC practice is enacted, determining which forms of knowledge are legitimised, which voices are amplified, and which trajectories of progression are made possible.

The current state is therefore conceptualised as a historically sedimented configuration of these system conditions. Through cumulative policy reform, marketisation, gendered constructions of care, and uneven resource allocation, ECEC professionalism has been patterned into an externally defined and compliance-oriented form (Osgood, 2010; Urban, 2010). Practitioners are frequently required to evidence alignment with regulatory frameworks while having limited authorship over the criteria by which their work is evaluated (Archer, 2021; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016; Urban et al., 2012). What is produced is not a deficit of expertise, but a condition of structurally mediated agency, in which professional autonomy is constrained by the regulatory and economic logics that govern the sector. In this sense, the current state reflects a particular distribution of power: professionalism is rhetorically affirmed, yet materially circumscribed.

Within this structured field, professional confidence is theorised as a relational and collective capacity that enables practitioners to navigate, negotiate, and potentially contest these constraints. The five interrelated components – awareness, positive action, skilful advocacy, collective action, and purposeful passion – operate as iterative capacities rather than linear stages.

- Awareness develops critical system literacy.
- Positive action establishes practice-based credibility within existing accountability regimes.
- Skilful advocacy translates credibility into strategic engagement with organisational and policy arenas.
- Collective action amplifies agency beyond the individual and disrupts the isolation that sustains marginalisation.

➤ Purposeful passion sustains normative commitment under conditions of institutional resistance.

Crucially, the model does not posit system change as inevitable or as a final desired state. Instead, it conceptualises change as continuously negotiated and contingent. As professional confidence becomes collectivised, it may generate pressures that unsettle dominant narratives, influence policy conversations, and gradually reshape institutional habitus. Yet system conditions remain resilient, capable of absorbing, deflecting, or reasserting control. Professional confidence therefore functions both as adaptive meritocratic agency within prevailing structures and as a potential catalyst for their incremental reconfiguration.

By foregrounding this tension, the model contributes to debates within Power and Education concerning how professional subjectivities are governed and how agency can be mobilised within asymmetrical power relations. It reframes ECEC professionalisation not as a technocratic reform project nor as an individualised responsibility, but as an ongoing struggle over authorship, recognition, and authority. Professionalism is thus neither wholly imposed nor fully self-determined; it is continually negotiated within a field structured by power, yet open to contestation through collective capacity-building.

The five professional confidence capacities operate not as discrete stages but as a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Awareness is sharpened through the experience of advocacy; collective action creates new spaces for positive action; purposeful passion sustains engagement when advocacy encounters resistance. Their interaction reflects the dual character of agency within structured environments: practitioners must initially navigate prevailing system conditions in order to build credibility and influence, yet collective amplification enables them to move beyond accommodation towards contestation. In Miller's (2019) terms, professional confidence enables both meritocratic agency within existing institutional rules and the gradual reworking of institutional habitus. Without collective mobilisation, however, confidence risks being contained within organisational boundaries rather than exerting pressure on the broader regulatory and cultural architecture of the sector. The following section illustrates how these dynamics are enacted in practice through inclusive, practice-based leadership.

Change from within: Professional confidence as inclusive leadership

In the context of the framework outlined in Figure 1, leadership is not defined by formal titles or positional authority; rather, it is the capacity to create conditions in which the professional confidence of others can take root and flourish. This perspective aligns with Hoskins and Smedley's (2020) emphasis on leadership as an inclusive, participatory process and with Miller's (2019) recognition that leadership potential exists at every level of an organisation. In ECEC, where hierarchical pathways are often

limited, such bottom-up leadership becomes both a necessity and a transformative force.

The narratives of three participants, Shelly, Audrey, and Shaima, from Study 1 (2024) illustrate how the five components of the professional confidence framework translate into lived practice and how leadership becomes a catalyst for change from within. These participants represent a sub-section of the full participant set in Study 1 (2024), working in three distinct areas of the ECEC sector as detailed below, all with over 8 years of experience in the sector. This data was collected with ethical approval and in line with this approval, pseudonyms are being used.

Awareness and positive action from shelly: A home base educator and manager

Shelly's account illustrates how professional confidence begins with critical awareness of professional identity and the language that shapes it, which in turn prompts early forms of positive action.

'...I find the term child minder derogatory to what we do. I'm really angry. I've actually written to Pacey my professional bodies several times saying, ...you've got the power to change this. Why don't you and it is something they've looked at, but they've never done it. And I'm thinking you're actually doing us a dis dis-justice, fuelling it, aren't they?'

Shelly's account reflects the foundational work of building awareness of her own professional strengths, of how policy directives intersect with daily practice, and of the limitations imposed by organisational structures. In her case, awareness was not a passive recognition but an active orientation, enabling her to take positive action in areas she could control, such as re-framing conversations with colleagues to focus on pedagogical intent rather than compliance. This kind of leadership, grounded in professional confidence and practical problem-solving, is a clear example of meritocratic agency in Miller's (2019) terms, earning influence within the immediate setting while preparing the ground for broader advocacy.

Skilful advocacy and collective action from Audrey: A consultant

Audrey's narrative demonstrates how developing professional confidence enables practitioners to move beyond individual action towards skilful advocacy and the facilitation of collective understanding.

'I like a bit of guidance, but I also like to interpret that and break it down... And I think that that's what people need, because there are many myths that..., you know, evolve very quickly. People don't actually take some time to read and interpret the guidance. Now that's because either they don't know where to access the guidance. They haven't been told. They are scared of the guidance and the terminology that's in there is come from the government, my God, how am I going to interpret that?'

Audrey's narrative demonstrates the shift into skilful advocacy, as she used her accumulated professional confidence to open space for dialogue with senior leaders, reframing resource constraints as opportunities for creative solutions rather than deficits. She also initiated collective action, facilitating peer-learning sessions that encouraged staff to share strategies and reflect together on practice challenges. This collective dimension illustrates how inclusive leadership can break down silos and normalise a culture of shared problem-solving. In doing so, Audrey moved beyond intra-organisational influence towards shaping organisational priorities, aligning with Miller's (2019) observation that collective voice is essential for institutional habitus change.

Purposeful passion from Shaima: A room leader

Shaima's experience highlights how professional confidence is sustained through purposeful passion, particularly in maintaining commitment to inclusive practice under challenging conditions.

'I think one of the ... key things is respect in terms of, me respecting team ideas, and a team being able to share and me... being receptive of that, to recognise each other's views on what is going on and sometimes, that can be quite a challenge'.

Shaima's leadership was marked by purposeful passion, a deep commitment to the values of inclusion and high-quality early education, sustained despite staffing pressures and policy shifts. She modelled resilience and encouraged others to take initiative, creating a ripple effect of confidence across her team. By mentoring less experienced colleagues and championing their contributions in external forums, she extended her influence beyond the setting. In Miller's (2019, 2021) terms, this work sits at the intersection of organisational and inter-organisational levels, where sustained commitment can begin to alter how professionalism is perceived and valued across contexts.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate how leadership, when understood as cultivating space for others' confidence to grow, transforms the professional confidence model from a conceptual framework into a practical strategy for change. At the individual level, it empowers practitioners to act with purpose, navigate constraints, and seek opportunities for influence. At the team level, it fosters cultures of trust, collaboration, and shared agency. Over time, as these leadership practices proliferate and connect across organisations, they build the momentum required for system-level change. This is a shift not imposed from above but grown from within the profession itself.

These examples show that professional confidence is not an abstract quality but a lived, relational process that unfolds within, and often despite, the constraints of the system. Shelly, Audrey, and Shaima each demonstrate how influence can be grown from everyday practice, extended through inclusive leadership, and leveraged to reshape

organisational cultures. Collectively, they illustrate the framework's capacity to generate momentum across Miller's (2019) stages, from intra-organisational meritocratic agency to the early foundations of inter-organisational and system-level change. The challenge now is to scale these patterns beyond individual stories, mobilising them as a collective strategy for redefining professionalism in ECEC. This is the focus of the final section: a call to action for practitioners, leaders, and policymakers to co-create the conditions in which professional confidence can thrive and transform the system from within.

Conclusion: A call to action

This paper began by diagnosing the realities of system failure in ECEC, comprising low status, external control, and professional voicelessness, mapped against Miller's progression barriers and system conditions (2019; 2021). It set out a pathway from that current state to a desired state, where practitioners' confidence, voice, and agency drive transformation from within. The framework in Figure 1 shows how professional confidence develops through five interconnected capacities that strengthen practitioners' ability to act and influence within their professional contexts. Working within existing system conditions, these capacities enable practitioners not only to navigate constraints but also to gradually reshape the narratives and practices that define professionalism in ECEC.

Figure 1 underscores the point that transformation is not the work of a few high-profile leaders, nor is it only the outcome of top-down reform. It is the cumulative, compounding effect of many individuals and teams choosing to lead from where they are, in ways that challenge and reframe the system conditions impacting their work. Real change demands coordinated effort across the profession's key stakeholders and below are initial recommendations which provide this grounding:

For leaders: Create deliberate space for advocacy and collaboration. In Figure 1 terms, this means nurturing awareness and positive action in others, amplifying skilful advocacy by offering platforms for staff voice, and actively supporting collective action initiatives that connect teams with wider networks. Leadership in this framework is inclusive and distributive; its measure is not the leader's profile but the confidence and capacity of those they lead.

For policymakers: Listen to, and empower, grassroots professionals. Recognise that collective action is not an obstacle but a resource, and that purposeful passion is the sector's renewable energy source for improvement. Policy must be informed by those who live the realities of ECEC daily, and legislation, funding, and inspection systems should be designed to enable rather than contain practitioner agency.

For practitioners: See yourselves as active agents in shaping the profession. Use awareness to understand both your strengths and the system you work in. Take positive

action in your practice, however small, and develop skilful advocacy to influence colleagues, leaders, and stakeholders. Join or initiate collective action efforts that align with your purposeful passion, knowing that each step builds toward the conditions where professionalism is defined from within.

Finally, while this paper has rightly interrogated systemic constraints, its ultimate focus is the child at the centre. Every increase in practitioner confidence, every act of advocacy, every moment of collaboration is ultimately in service of creating the best possible conditions for children to learn, thrive, and flourish. If the profession can move together from system failure to a self-defined, empowered state, it will not only transform itself, creating new narratives which shape the future of ECEC, but it will also transform the lives and futures of the children it serves.

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Ethical considerations

Please note that the paper is a conceptual paper that has been influenced by the following: Study one Fogarty L (2024) *Leadership in early childhood education and care: Insider perspectives* [Doctoral thesis, Brunel University London]. Brunel University Research Archive (BURA). <https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/29970>. This study was approved by the Brunel Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 23,845-A-Feb/2021- 31,448-1) on February 18, 2021. Respondents gave written consent for review and signature before starting data collection.

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