

Strategies for Change: rethinking professionalism in early childhood

Tomorrow's Professionals: balancing the demands of policy and practice

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Status quo and change: the dilemma with education

One of my concerns, at the time, as valid then as it is now, was with the political consequences of that kind of relationship between parents and children, which later becomes that between teachers and pupils, when it came to the learning process of our infant democracy. *It was as if family and school were so completely subjected to the greater context of global society that they could do nothing but reproduce the authoritarian ideology.*

The revelatory, gnosiological practice of education does not itself effect the transformation of the world: but it implies it.

Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope

Mathias Urban

Outline

- Professionalism: a new paradigm in early childhood?
- Talking the talk: dominant discourses and regimes of truths?
- Walking the walk: making sense of uncertainty and ambiguity
- A different paradigm: professionalism in early childhood as an activity (praxis) of creating understandings
- Beyond competence profiles: systemic professionalism, critical reflection and transformative practice

Professionalism: a new paradigm in early childhood?

- Early childhood has moved up European policy agendas, driven by common concerns:
 - “The wish to increase women’s labour market participation; to reconcile work and family responsibilities on a basis more equitable for women; to confront the demographic challenges faced by OECD countries (in particular falling fertility rates and the general ageing of populations, and the need to address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage.”
 - “Economic prosperity depends on mainstreaming a high employment/population ratio”
(OECD 2006)

ECCE in the European policy context

- Recommendation of the Council of Ministers on Childcare (1992)
- Quality targets in services for young children (1996)
- Barcelona targets (2002)
- Charter of Fundamental Rights
 - Art. 74 (right to education)
 - Art. 81 (non-discrimination)
 - Art. 84 (rights of the child)
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

‘Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.’

- Recession caveat: Public childcare, as a means to increase female labour market participation is at risk in time of economic deceleration.
- Recent European examples: post-1990 Germany, post-celtic tiger Ireland ...
- UK?
- De facto, economic interests are controlling women's, men's and children's participation in society – fundamental rights to participation are granted - or denied - according to the rationales of a globalised economy that lacks any democratic legitimacy.



Professionalism: a new paradigm in early childhood?

- Both scholarly discourse and policy documents refer to the early childhood workforce as something that has to be *professionalised*
 - “ the need for early childhood staff and provision to value and respond to the needs of ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families remains a challenge in many countries.”
(OECD 2001)
 - Workforce is central for achieving policy goals of increasing both quantity and quality of provision
(Oberhuemer 2000, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford 2002; Dalli 2003, 2005; Mac Naughton 2005; Miller, 2008)
 - “ ... the importance of pre-primary education is increasingly recognised throughout Europe and [it is] called for moving beyond existing pilot projects into generalised implementation, supported by investment, in particular in qualified staff.”
(Rationale for a European Commission policy seminar, 2008)
- Most countries face major workforce challenges

When *quality* meets *profession* ...

- The *Every Child Matters Strategy* links explicitly to a *Children's Workforce Strategy* that aims at building a “world-class workforce for children” (DFES 2004, 2005)
- The message: Early Childhood practitioners need to be “qualified”, “trained” and “skilled” in order to achieve the highly ambitious outcomes.
- Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) ensures that those working with children under the age of five benefit from the highest level of training. The skills and experience graduates acquire will not only give children brighter futures, but also enable EYPs to lead and inspire others to give all children the start in life they deserve. (CWDC)

A necessary reminder:

• ***“QUALITY “IS A HIGHLY PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT***

Too often, the language of quality is employed to legitimize the proliferating maze of regulations in ECEC.

Beware of its implicit notions of universality, technocratic manageability and measurability.

We should be cautious not to lose the “shared unease” with the terminology of *Quality*.

Quality: a questionable concept – a problem that needs to be explored rather than to be taken for granted or to be presented as the solution.
(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 2007)

If professionalism is the *solution* to the problem – what is the *problem* with the problem?

- Conceptualisations of the early childhood profession are embedded in the ways we understand and make sense of the world and society
- They are also embedded in our ways of understanding *knowledge*, how it is generated, how it relates to practice – professional epistemologies
- Prevailing conceptualisations of the early childhood profession are linked to a specific paradigm:

[a] “body of knowledge having specific and unique origins in the scientific revolution’ of seventeenth-century north-western Europe. [...] a specific form of knowledge, best thought of a ‘modern science’, is a relatively recent, local activity that was coproduced with industrial capitalism.”

(Turnbull)

Profession/Knowledge/Power

(Michel Foucault /Gill Deleuze)

- *Professions* to 'solve' given social problems (Parsons)
 - Need to be stratified – separation between knowledge production, distribution and application
 - The professional understood as expert, applying scientific knowledge to produce evidence-based, hence *right practice*
- Professionalisation is thus an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources - special knowledge and skills - into another - social and economic rewards. To maintain scarcity implies a tendency to monopoly: monopoly of expertise in the market, monopoly of status in a system of stratification. (Larson)

In other words ...



Why, anybody can have a brain. That's a very mediocre commodity. Every pusillanimous creature that crawls on the Earth or slinks through slimy seas has a brain. Back where I come from, we have universities, seats of great learning, where men go to become great thinkers. And when they come out, they think deep thoughts and with no more brains than you have. But they have one thing you haven't got: a diploma.

(The Wizard of Oz)

Why, anybody can have a brain. That's a very mediocre commodity. Every pusillanimous creature that crawls on the Earth or slinks through slimy seas has a brain. Back where I come from, we have universities, seats of great learning, where

Talking the talk: dominant discourses and regimes of truths?

- What is presented to us as being *general* about professionalism (in policy documents, regulations, frameworks ...) can also be seen as a manifestation of a particular discourse:
 - A very specific way of talking about professionalism that is neither neutral nor necessarily appropriate for the field of early childhood education and care.
 - An effective means of control and regulation of diverse individual practices through dominant knowledge.
 - A regime of truths:
Discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects (and subjects) of which they speak”.
(Michel Foucault 1972)

- In the debates on professionalism today, there is a clear distinction between those who talk *and those who are talked about.* (cf. McGillivray 2008)
- ECEC, as a *professional system*, is highly stratified.
- Scholarly discussions about what it entails to be “professional” in ECEC often express expectations towards the individual practitioner.
- They seldom acknowledge the inequities of the knowledge producing and processing structures within the system.
- The *epistemological hierarchy* consists of distinct layers and there is a powerful downstream of knowledge and expectations
 - *Knowledge* is produced (e.g. through research ...)
 - ... transferred (through professional preparation, training etc.)
 - ... applied (practice)

- The layout of the early childhood professional system constantly increases pressure on practitioners.
 - It contributes to the notion that there is a clear distinction between theory and practice.
 - The theory/practice dichotomy links well with structural-functional thinking:
 - A “social problem” – and the way it is defined – is distinct from its “solution”.
 - The role of the professional is to “solve” the given problem by “applying” the specific knowledge they have acquired through formalised training

“To ensure that children and young people achieve the five Every Child Matters outcomes, it is vital to have a children's workforce that is skilled, well-led and supported by effective, shared systems and processes.”

(Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007)

The problem with evidence

On the research side, evidence-based education seems to favour a technocratic model in which it is assumed that the only relevant research questions are questions about the effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting, among other things, that what counts as 'effective' crucially depends on judgements about what is educationally desirable.
(Biesta, 2007)

When „effectiveness“ is defined externally, and where decisions about „outcomes“ are already made, it is almost impossible for practitioners to make judgements about what is relevant or desirable for their work. Evidence based-practice can disqualify practitioners and prevent asking critical questions:

The focus on 'what works' makes it difficult, if not impossible to ask the questions of what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter.
(Biesta, 2007)

- The conceptualisation of the early childhood professional in a paradigm of
 - clearly defined problems,
 - predetermined outcomes,
 - evidence-based (hence “right”) practicesimplies failure.
- But “failure” (ambiguity, and the uncertainty about the outcomes of interactions with children in complex life situations) lies at the very core of early childhood practice.
- This leaves EC practitioners with a fundamental dilemma: They have to construct and communicate their professional identity *against* the key characteristics of their practice.

„I am aware that my actions are grounded in uncertainty [...] based on professional knowledge, on the one hand, but always trying to understand the actual, ever changing situation. We've seen that in the discussion about the Nintendo“ [laughs]

(A day in the Life ..., Germany)

“The disruption of the binary between research and practice is happening. I don't know where it will take us, but I think, it will take us in good directions.”

(Strategies for Change, Australia)

“And that all creates an environment, an ethos of reflection and willingness to consider alternatives beyond current practice.”

(Strategies for Change, New Zealand)

Walking the walk: making sense of uncertainty

THE REASON WHY LIFE IS SO STRANGE IS THAT WE SIMPLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IS AROUND THE NEXT CORNER, SOMETHING MOST OF US HAVE LEARNED TO FORGET (COLUM McCANN: ZOLI)

- Even the most common situations in early childhood practice are complex. There are no “simple” tasks that imply one particular action towards their “solution”

In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problem situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work. *He must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense.*

(Donald Schön, 1983)

Creating understandings: towards a new knowledge ecology for the early childhood profession

- The conceptual shift from “acquisition of knowledge” to an active, co-constructivist *making of experiences* appears to uncontested today – at least in our understanding of children’s learning. What are the implications for professional preparation?
(Dayan)
- Sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford).
What are the implications for research?
- A professional dilemma: EC practitioners are acting a relational, reciprocal, open and *uncertain* professionalism. They are navigators of complexity rather than technicians.
- But they are part of a professional system that operates within a paradigm of certainty, evidence and hierarchical *knowledge-production-and-application*.
- They are expected to act professionally within an *unprofessional* system.

A different paradigm: Professionalism in early childhood as an activity (praxis) of creating understandings

- How can we challenge and question the hierarchy between those who produce *knowledge-through-research* and those who apply and deliver?
- *Coming to an understanding* is a dialogic process “in which one participates, not an activity over which one exercises methodological control.”
(Schwandt, 2004 on hermeneutic enquiry)
- It allows for the individual practitioner to become an actor in the system that generates professional knowledge.
- But there are risks (especially for the researcher ...):
In a mutual process of *meaning-making*, researchers can no longer treat their informants as the “generalized other”, seeking only to understand “typical” behaviour.
- It requires openness and respect for the partners in dialogue:
“presuming they possess an independence and voice we must address and by which we ourselves are addressed”.
(Warnke, 2002)

Challenges (threats) for the researcher:

- The counterpart of respect for the autonomous other is the recognition of the researcher's own ways of understanding and knowing – **and the historically and culturally conditioned biases that have shaped them:**
One's own *hermeneutical situation*
(Hans-Georg Gadamer)
- To listen to others different from ourselves we must remain open and that means parts of our interpretative forestructure is rendered at risk. **Said differently, active listening requires personal vulnerability.** Risking self-identity is dangerous.
(Garrison, 1996)

- Creating understandings is a participatory process.
- Systematically organizing dialogues in which all participants equally talk and listen challenges the hegemony of expertise and dominant knowledge.
- It bridges the gap between the *ways of being* and the *ways of knowing* in a professional system.
- Dialogue across differences is possible.
- It opens a perspective to overcome the inherent dilemma of the early childhood profession as it “embraces difference, diversity and the messiness of human life – rather than seeking to resolve it” (Schwandt, 2004)

Cloudy day navigation

Research: gathering evidence or a
'practice of creating understandings'?

Practice: application or production of
professional knowledge?

Addressing the 'democratic deficit'
(Biesta) in educational research and
reclaiming terminology

Evidence – as in 'practice-based evidence'

Outcomes – unexpected, surprising, innovative

From accountability to *narrativity*

Towards systemic professionalism in early childhood: hopeful examples and an open framework

Three cornerstones for a systemic and critically-ecologic professionalism

- A shift of perspectives, from the individual practitioner (who has to be professionalized, in order to apply and deliver) towards reciprocal relationships between the various actors at the different layers of the system.
- A key feature of the professional system: its ability to encourage and systematically create spaces for dialogue and for asking critical questions – at every layer of the system – and to value the multitude and diversity of answers as a key to creating new understandings.
- Hope, as an ontological need (Paolo Freire): Educational practice is there for a purpose and it implies change. But the hoped-for has to be debated. Beyond the question of *what works* lie questions of value and purpose

Conscientisação - a transformative approach to research/praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to change it' (P. Freire)



Hermeneutic Circle

research as practice



Critical reflection
transformative practice

Cultural Circle
Conscientização

*As an ontological need, hope needs practice
in order to become historical concreteness.
That is why there is no hope
in sheer hopefulness*

Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope



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