

EDITORIAL

This special edition presents some of the thinking of members of the Special Interest Group on Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care who met for the first time in a hotel lobby at the annual EECERA conference in Malta in 2004.

Gathered from all corners of the globe, a group of early childhood researchers, scholars and tertiary lecturers, discussed a simple question: What does it mean to be “professional” in early childhood education and care? An easy afternoon exercise, one might suppose, given the expertise gathered in the circle. It quickly became apparent that the simple question did not have a simple answer. Instead, it spawned a multitude of questions and an engaged discussion that has continued at each subsequent conference. The discussions stretched out between conferences as members organised pre-conference meetings around the annual EECERA conference, held symposia within the conference, and initiated the cross-national project *A day in the life of an early years practitioner* which is currently in its pilot phase (e.g., see Miller this edition).

In retrospect, setting up this international working group was a very timely move given the unprecedented attention that early childhood education and care is gaining in many countries. Over the last years, many countries have set ambitious policy goals to increase both the quantity and quality of services for young children and their families. In most cases, the strategies to develop the early years systems are hooked to a strategy to further develop the workforce, which is increasingly seen as central to achieving policy intentions. As a consequence, the *professionalism*, and the *professionalising*, of the early childhood workforce have become key issues not only in the multitudinous policy documents but also in scholarly discourses in academic journals and at conferences. Curricula, or national pedagogical frameworks, have been introduced as a means to foster professional practice. Qualifications, in-service training/education and an increasing number of university degrees are contributing to the notion that there is a profession in early childhood and an associated need for “professional” development.

Yet, while the terminology of early childhood professionalism is increasingly pervasive, from our perspective there remains a slight unease. Do we really understand what being professional means in the early childhood work context? How can *profession* be conceptualised in early childhood settings? How might one *act professionally* in increasingly diverse and rapidly changing social and cultural contexts? And: Do we have a common ground of understanding about these terms? Do we have key concepts that we can agree on?

The idea of this special edition arose out of discussions that highlighted a common interest in engaging with these questions and seeking an understanding of professionalism in local contexts that might throw light on its global implications. The articles in this edition address these issues.

Approaching the subject from different theoretical and practical perspectives, this special edition explores *professionalism* as a conceptual issue, as a policy issue in diverse local contexts, and as a matter that impacts on all aspects of practice, including the practicum component of early childhood teacher preparation courses. From these diverse analytical perspectives, *professionalism* can be understood as a *discourse* as much as a *phenomenon*: as something that is constantly under re-construction.

Aiming to understand *professionalism* as a process rather than an object, then, inevitably draws attention to the actors and to the relationships that link them. Within the special interest group, some key questions that have stood out have included: To what extent should professional *autonomy* lie at the core of early childhood occupations – and how can this autonomy be achieved? How can *critical thinking* be introduced and encouraged in professional preparation, practice and reflection? And how can early childhood professionals be encouraged not only to operate from a value-based and ethical perspective, but to contribute to the co-creation of professional ethics and knowledge?

As convenors of the *professionalism* special interest group, we undertook the editing of this special edition as the first step in opening up our discussions to a wider audience. The collection of articles in this edition throws light on the range of topics discussed within the group: It does not exhaust them. Most articles are grounded in a specific local context – but they are by no means exemplars, representing *the* Finnish or *the* Australian or any other case. We prefer to see them as individual lenses that focus on the issue of professionalism from their particular vantage point.

The first three papers traverse a range of ideas about the construction of professionalism, professional knowledge, and professional practice. Mathias Urban explores the ways knowledge is produced in hierarchical professional systems and argues for an alternative paradigm where research and practice reciprocally are linked through the hermeneutical concept of creating understandings. Yael Dayan describes her personal journey as an experienced practicum supervisor seeking a democratic and humanistic professionalism that is not merely notional but inherently practical. Carmen Dalli, drawing on practitioners’ voices, adds a ground-up perspective to definitions of professionalism.

The next two papers introduce students’ perspectives into the picture: In a joint paper, Marja Kuisma and Anette Sandberg trace the different perceptions and interpretations of professionalism of a group of student teachers and their supervising teachers. Kate Adams, reporting on a study carried out with students and recent graduates, investigates the importance of occupational titles and degree-level studies for professional identity; by embedding her discussion in an account of recent policy changes in the Scottish context, Adams highlights the impact of structural changes on individuals’ sense of professional identity, including the potential for newly-emerging identities to be prematurely disrupted.

Situated in the same socio-cultural context, Finland, the next two papers address professionalism from two distinct angles and arrive at different but complementary positions. Starting from a model of professionalism as professional expertise, Kirsti Karila discusses professionalism as a multi-level phenomenon impacted by national policies as well as municipal implementation, structural arrangements within work settings, and personal life story. By analysing different definers of professionalism at the different levels against practitioners’ perspectives of their role, Karila highlights some current contradictions. Jarmo Kinos applies a Neo-Weberian-Bourdieuian perspective to the professionalisation of the day care workforce. This enables him to unravel some of the contradictory and conflictual processes that emerge when professional groups struggle for resources and social capital.

Gill McGillivray and Linda Miller both explore the impact of an imposed professionalisation. McGillivray analyses the changes over time in discourses on professionalism and how they contribute to shaping the professional identities of those who are seldom talked with, but are often talked about. Linda Miller elaborates on the tensions and challenges that have arisen in the UK with the introduction of the role of the early years professional. While acknowledging the limitations of externally imposed standards, Miller argues that the new role is crucial to raising standards and to the establishment of a new multi-professional role. She suggests that it is possible for training providers and practitioners to challenge regulatory frameworks and to become active in developing a sense of identity even in the face of complex workforce reform.

The final article raises sobering concerns about the future of professional identity in contexts where the corporatisation of childcare provision is fast taking hold producing an enterprise culture that most early childhood practitioners would not recognise as part of their professional identity. Christine Woodrow argues that the issue is a troubling one especially in the Australian context where early childhood professional identity is also under threat from accountability procedures in teacher education institutions that are privileging school learning and eroding early childhood expertise.

This special edition is a collection of starting points, or snapshots of an ongoing discussion in the Special Interest Group on Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care. On behalf of this group, we wish to thank EECERA for its support and encouragement and for providing a hospitable and inspiring environment at the annual conferences. We thank the contributors for sharing their thoughts and the members of the Special Interest Group for the discussions that made this publication possible. We hope our starting points will be of interest for our readers. You are invited to join the discussion!

Mathias Urban and Carmen Dalli

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