

EDITORIAL

Rethinking Professionalism in Early Childhood: untested feasibilities and critical ecologies

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Each young child, wrote Martin Woodhead in his 1996 publication for the Bernard van Leer Foundation *In Search of the Rainbow*, has a unique potential 'for development of human capacities, for communication and cooperation, for skill and feeling, for reason and imagination, for practicality and spirituality, for determination and compassion' (Woodhead, 1996, p. 12). The right of each young child to be supported to reach her or his full potential would be an excellent starting point for a journey to discuss diverse and different understandings and conceptualisations of those professionals – early childhood practitioners – working with young children, families and communities. Indeed, there has been an increasing public interest, in recent years, in what is deemed to be a critical period of human life and, in line with it, an increasing awareness of the importance of the early years workforce and its members. The reasons, however, for moving early childhood issues up political agendas into the public sphere and, quite often, onto electoral agendas are as diverse and contradictory as the many possible ways of understanding *children* and *childhoods*, and the social institutions set up for and around (seldom with) them in complex human societies. In her 2009 report to the European Commission, reviewing international evidence about the social benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC), Helen Penn (2009, p. 7) explores in detail the 'many competing, intersecting and overlapping arguments that drive the development of ECEC policy; not all of them compatible'. Many countries, for instance, have set ambitious policy goals to increase the quantity of services for young children and families, and the quality of provision, following the rationale of a socio-economic agenda that strongly believes that 'economic prosperity depends on mainstreaming a high employment/population ratio' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, p. 78). From this point of view, early childhood and its institutions become a crucial factor in policies 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 ... and the need to address child poverty and educational disadvantage' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, p. 12).

Historically, early childhood programmes and services have been set up to address children's developmental (physical, emotional, nutritional, educational) needs; their practices crucially depending on adults' judgements of what these needs are and how they can best be met. But practices seen as *developmentally appropriate* often build on the notion that *child development* as such is universal, and occurring in a similar pattern in every child, regardless of the social and material world he or she is born into. This notion has been widely criticised by authors inside and outside the early childhood field (for example, Cannella, 1997; Burman, 2008; Penn, 2008; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2008), not least because it generalises findings of research on a very limited population of (mainly) North American and European children (Penn, 2008). Anthropologists, as well as critical cross-cultural psychologists (for example, Elliott & Grigorenko, 2008) and early childhood

scholars (for example, Cannella & Viruru, 2004), offer different perspectives on growing up, and on parental or collective care for young children, particularly in majority world countries, which 'radically challenge ... some of the standard assumptions ... which underpin discussions about ECEC' (Penn, 2009, p. 22).

Increasingly prominent in recent years is yet another rationale for societal involvement with early childhood: framed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and emphasised by the *General Comment No. 7* (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005), there is a shift in the debate from children's supposed needs, which often are defined in a framework of *future* needs of society, economy, the labour market, etc., to children's well-being and children's interests in the *here and now*. 'Young children are rights holders' is the opening sentence of *General Comment No. 7*, and it goes on to reaffirm 'that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is to be applied holistically in early childhood, taking account of the principle of the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights' (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p. 2). Human beings are holders of rights and social actors from the beginning of life. In this claim of *General Comment No. 7* reverberate the convictions and pedagogical practices of educators like John Dewey (1966), Janusz Korczak (1991), Loris Malaguzzi (see, for example, Edwards et al, 1998), Paolo Freire (2000, 2004) and others who understood education as a political practice, as meaningful and equal interaction between individuals (children and adults) and communities; practices that are deeply embedded in the sociocultural, economic and historical context of human society. Their concept of education is diametrically opposed to decontextualised, technocratic practices imposed on both children and educators in many educational institutions which had been set up, as Michel Foucault analyses, alongside other institutions like hospitals and prisons, as highly effective means of *control*, *normalisation* and *confinement* in Western societies from the seventeenth century (Foucault, 1979; Foucault & Rabinow, 1991).

Why this excursus in the introduction to a journal focusing on *professionalism* in early childhood? Because care and education for young children, and the social institutions we construct around early childhood, lie at the very heart of any human society – they define what we are (*here and now*), and what we aspire to become as a society. Early childhood education and care, as Martin Woodhead (1996, p. 12) puts it, is a fundamental need of human society: 'Through the care and education for young children, a society constructs and reconstructs community and economy, ensures continuity of tradition between generations, and makes innovation and transformation possible.' In a global community that is increasingly aware of its diversity (which has always been around), we cannot take these institutions as givens. Nor can we take for granted the educational and pedagogical practices enacted within them. The ways we understand children and childhoods shape the institutions: as commodities for working parents, as sites of intervention and social engineering, as means of normalisation, or as forums in a civil society (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007); spaces for encounter, democracy, experimentation and meaningful interaction. These ways of understanding, too, shape our concepts of what it means to be, to become and to act *professionally* in working with young children, families and communities. *Ways of knowing* (how we come to know what we know about children, upbringing, etc.), i.e. professional epistemologies, are reciprocally linked to *ways of being* – to professional practices of individuals as well as of the professional system we are all part of (Urban, 2008).

There is a lot of talk around *professionalism* in early childhood. Internationally, influential discourses, both scholarly and political, link ambitious goals to workforce requirements. Despite huge differences between countries' approaches to early childhood institutions, and to qualifications and roles of staff (Oberhuemer, 2005), there appears to be a broad consensus that the workforce is central to achieving the ambitious policy goals, for example, of increasing both quantity and quality of provision (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Dalli, 2003; MacNaughton, 2005; Oberhuemer, 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). In these discourses, the workforce and its members are regularly referred to as something that has to be professionalised, not least in order to be able to cope with the increasing challenges of the work (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2006).

This special issue of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* is undoubtedly placed within these discourses to further develop, rethink and re-form the early childhood profession. It does not, however, promote one particular answer; it does not attempt to offer one specific *solution* to the

problem of early childhood professionalism. Instead, it challenges the notion that there is *one* problem that should be dealt with by applying a specific (right) solution. It aims at exploring the issue from a range of perspectives, thus hoping to contribute to *creating an understanding* (Schwandt, 2004; Urban, 2008) of the critical questions we need to address in our field. The aims of this publication are threefold:

- First, to *rethink* professionalism in working with young children, families and communities; to offer a space for critical questions and, in doing so, perhaps build on some of the more radical roots of our discipline and profession that are sometimes forgotten. Friedrich Fröbel, for instance, who initiated the kindergarten movement in Germany, explicitly situated his approach to elementary education for all children in the context of the democracy movement that culminated in the revolution of 1848. It is one of the interesting historical marginalia that the 1848 German revolutionary parliament debated the necessity of universal access to kindergarten. As education for all, and from an early age, it was seen as the prerequisite for the democratisation of society. Fröbel's kindergarten was a radical concept in many respects. Not only was it explicit about the link between education and democracy in a civil society. For the first time, the kindergarten conceptualised education as detached from both state and church – as a public good and civil responsibility instead. Moreover, Fröbel's kindergarten was a movement to professionalise early education by opening qualification pathways and higher education to women.
- Second, to contribute to the still small, but growing, body of professional knowledge that derives from a wealth of diverse *local* practices in a multitude of sociocultural environments inside and outside the dominant Western context. The articles in this journal present and discuss contextualised practices and experiences. As a selection, they aim at contributing to reclaiming *practice-based evidence* (Urban, 2009) in our field, in order to complement – and to some extent counter – the powerful notion of early childhood education as an evidence-based practice, which, on its own, is limiting and counterproductive. Research evidence (gathered in the past and in a different context) is likely to be detached from those involved in the actual educational process, evading any scrutiny, plurality and democratic negotiation of values, purposes and concrete goals by participants. It contributes to what Gert Biesta (2007) refers to as the 'democratic deficit' of educational research and practice. Second, the very promise of evidence-based practice – to reproduce what has proven to be effective – leads to closure rather than openness. It is likely to result in sterile processes that prevent, instead of encourage, invention and innovation. Creating new understandings and 'learning from success' (Rosenfeld, 1998), and cherishing unexpected outcomes and surprises becomes difficult if not impossible.
- Third, to tackle the implicit theory/practice divide that underlies prevailing conceptualisations of professionalism as well as mainstream educational research (Urban, 2008). Just as educational practice entails constant reflection and creation of understandings (Schön, 1983), theory and research should be understood as practices themselves that relate to, and speak with (as opposed to *about*), other practices, without assuming they have to be treated as objects. Rethinking the relationship between researcher and researched, Gilles Deleuze (2001) talks about 'transcendental empiricism' – from a perspective of hermeneutical philosophy one could refer to this relationship as a dialogic, shared activity of *creating understandings* (Schwandt, 2004). Therefore, the selection in this special issue includes theoretical and conceptual articles as well as accounts of early childhood professional practices in different contexts.

Peter Moss argues a case for a radical reconceptualisation of education, its purposes and concepts. Humankind is in a state of serious crisis, he argues, and *all* educators need to prepare for an education for survival. This raises fundamental questions, not least about the dangers of the very debate about professionalism itself – as it may divert us from the 'real task in hand, an education and educators able to respond to the crisis facing us' (p. 8). We cannot continue as we are.

A. Bame Nsamenang takes a critical constructive stance on early childhood professionalism, as he explores challenges arising from a West African context for children and childhood. Discussing West Africa's multiple early childhood heritages, and portraying children as social agents in their 'hybridized cultural circumstances' (p. 21), he argues for the need to recognise children and their families as key stakeholders and as partners in early child development professionalism.

Writing from yet another non-Western, majority world perspective, Zahirul Islam critically examines the prevailing concept of early childhood professional practice in Bangladesh, which is framed by a modern scientific paradigm introduced to the country through colonisation and which shows no understanding of the real-life situations of Bangladeshi children. Professionalism in the Bangladeshi context, he argues, can only be efficient if it develops respect for the 'little narratives' – the local knowledges, voices and perspectives.

Many countries rely on the private sector to provide services for young children and their families, despite growing evidence that private for-profit services tend to offer lower quality and exacerbate inequality. This is of particular relevance in countries that build their strategies to target poverty on early childhood intervention. Examining the self-conceptualisations of private nursery entrepreneurs in KwaZulu-Natal, Hasina Banu Ebrahim identifies how the 'business approach' marginalises access for young children from disadvantaged groups and neglects the diversity that characterises young children's lives in South Africa.

European early childhood scholars often refer to Aotearoa/New Zealand as the model for the future, citing its achievements in terms of curriculum (*Te Whāriki*) and professionalisation (the 10-year strategic plan). Like other countries, New Zealand early childhood education is facing increasing influences of neo-liberal policies and market ideologies. While neo-liberalism may contribute to an increase of managerial practices, a focus on the individual, and an obsession with outcomes and accountability, it is by no means a monolithic entity, argues Iris Duhn in her article on 'neo-liberal politics, privatisation and discourses of professionalism in New Zealand'. Careful examination reveals very different kinds of professionalism, enacted in particular contexts. Two of them are discussed in this article.

Situated in the New Zealand context, too, but coming from a different angle, Carmen Dalli takes a broader look at the policy developments that led to the ambitious goals and world-leading practices in New Zealand early childhood education. The advocacy and strategic action of practitioners, scholars and trade unionists were central to bringing early childhood to the top of the policy agenda. In a changed political context following the demise of the Labour government, new challenges arise which, as she argues, call for a re-emergence of a critical ecology of the profession.

In the European context, England is one of the countries that have undertaken enormous efforts to reform services for young children and families. Professionalisation, understood as a move towards a graduate workforce, was – and is – seen as central to the strategy of a major workforce reform, aiming at creating a 'world-class workforce for children', as one key policy document puts it (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). As part of this strategy, the new role of Early Years Professional has been created. But it falls short of expectations and requirements, does not necessarily meet criteria traditionally applied to a profession and maintains inequalities between the various professions working with young children. Eva Lloyd & Elaine Hallet ask: Is this a missed opportunity?

There are different ways of understanding what it means to be a professional, and what the purpose of a profession is in society. As I have argued elsewhere (Urban, 2008), these concepts are often limited, and derive from a structural-functionalist paradigm that is by no means appropriate for relational, dialogic and complex practices in early childhood. They are, quite often, a highly efficient means of control and normalisation of diverse individual practices, which, in turn, provokes resistance and non-compliance from practitioners. Marianne Fenech, Wendy Shepherd & Jennifer Sumsion take this as a starting point to explore the role of resistance in understanding early childhood teacher professionalism in the Australian context. Re-imagining professionalism in a frame of children's rights and teacher activism, their case study promotes resistance-based professionalism as an appealing alternative to supposedly professional technical practices.

Coming from a background of an activist, trainer and practitioner – and chief executive officer of an independent agency supporting early childhood services – Anke van Keulen casts a systemic perspective on early childhood professionalism in the context of private childcare providers in the Netherlands. Her article gives an account of an action research and development project that brought together practitioners, educational leaders and management of services to create 'critical learning communities'. Leaving behind notions of the individual professional as sole expert for her or his practices, the project takes important steps towards a systemic, 'critically ecologic' (Urban, 2007) professionalism. In order to achieve sustainable change in the complex

realities of private early childhood providers, participants at every level of the organisation have to be involved.

The final article in this special issue explores – and critiques – child-centred pedagogy, a concept frequently revered in European and Western early childhood practice. Drawing on feminist, postmodernist and post-structural theories, Rachel Langford examines how child-centred pedagogy contributes to the denial of the influences of gender, ethnicity and class on both practitioners and children. Her reflections and propositions are based on her experiences as a teacher educator in a Canadian context.

As I said at the beginning of this editorial, this special issue does not attempt to present early childhood as problematic in the first place, requiring solutions delivered by professional experts. Nor does it buy into the notion that professionally delivered early childhood services can provide a remedy for crises and inequalities of the wider society. It does, however, promote a perspective on early childhood institutions as spaces for encounter and meaningful interaction of many. Professionalism, from this point of view, is necessarily systemic, democratic and political. There may not be a coherent narrative to the articles in this issue, but this is intentionally so. If there is a line of argument across the contributions, it is that it is the multiplicity of perspectives that matters. Taken from there, this issue is an invitation to join the exploration.

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To end with – but by no means to conclude – two quotes that between them capture the essence of what professionalism in early childhood should be about:

Reality, as always happens in children's hands, reveals once again its infinite potential for transformation. (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 10)

One of the roots of education, which makes it specifically human, lies in the radicalness of an inconclusion that is perceived as such. The permanence of education lies in the constant character of search, perceived as necessary. Likewise, here lie also roots of the metaphysical foundation of hope. (Freire, 2004)

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