

EDITORIAL

Rethinking 'Professionalism' in the Early Years: perspectives from the United Kingdom

JAYNE OSGOOD

This special issue of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* presents a collection of perspectives on the issue of professionalism in early childhood education from the UK context. As guest editor, I have come to appreciate the work that Sue Grieshaber and Nicola Yelland undertake in preparing each edition of the journal and I thank them for providing me with the opportunity to edit this edition. The impetus for presenting the idea of a special issue to the editors stemmed from a very personal interest in the notion of professionalism in the early years, which I briefly outline.

I occupy the enviable position of working solely on research endeavours, located, as I am, in a research institute in London. In wrestling with current issues facing the early years community I overcame a persistent sense of isolation (as a specialist researcher in this field at an institute that covers other education phases and phenomena) by a chance encounter with *CIEC* whilst searching the Web for publications engaged in critique and theorisation. At about the same time, I was made aware of the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education (RECE) movement in the early years. These two 'discoveries' have opened up vital avenues, bodies of knowledge, networks and friendships. What these occurrences also alerted me to was the insular way in which I was guilty of working. These events and my feminist post-structural commitment to deconstruct and problematise the taken-for-granted prompted me to exercise some agency and conceive of ways in which I might subvert or unsettle the way in which I and others in the early years research community are positioned and actively position ourselves in individualised/insular ways.

In addition to my marginal (yet privileged) professional position is the neo-liberal context within which the academy is located in the twenty-first century. The plethora of conservative/traditionalist arenas for publication in the United Kingdom poses a direct challenge to academics wishing to present critiques of that which they research and teach. Taking the risk to present critical ideas can carry a heavy price. This in conjunction with the neo-liberal focus on competition, marketisation, commercialism – critique has become increasingly unpopular and all but banished from public discourse in the academy. But the cost of failing to overtly challenge policy reform agendas (that appear benign and persuasive at first glance) is too high a price to pay if we are, as we so frequently claim to be, committed to social justice.

The voice of the early years community (including academics, teacher educators, local policy-implementers and practitioners) is small but the workforce is enormous and continuing to grow. Yet still the United Kingdom is some way behind its international counterparts in terms of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The current climate is widely regarded as a key moment in time for overhauling ECEC in England; as such, the appeal of alternative models of education and care is widespread. However, enthusiasm for these alternative models is tempered by economic rationalism which ensures that only a bastardised version of the many exemplary international pedagogies and approaches will be available in the England. But the rhetoric would have us believe that well-resourced, universal and publicly funded models are attainable in a capitalist market economy; this is the nub of much contestation currently in the United Kingdom. The early years workforce in the United Kingdom is receiving unprecedented attention (from policy makers,

economists, the mass media and commercial business investors). In public discourse the workforce is constructed as the solution to society's ills – policy makers state that in focusing on the young child (and the educators/carers of young children) a raft of social phenomena can be addressed:

Government has long recognised the collective interest in ensuring that children get a good start in life: it is in the nation's social and economic interests: children are the citizens, workers, parents and leaders of the future. It is in everyone's interests that children are given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. This is all the more important in the context of an ageing society, where current generations will depend more heavily on those who follow. It is also in everyone's collective interests because of the large cost of failure. Investment in children to ensure they have opportunities and capabilities to contribute in positive ways throughout their lives is money well spent and it will reduce the cost of social failure. (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005, 2.11)

Clearly, the burden placed upon the shoulders of babies and very young children is enormous. The above excerpt is indicative of the powerful blaming discourses and projects of individualisation inherent within government policy (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2001). A raft of policy documents has been published in the past year and throughout is a stated commitment to eradicate child poverty, to make neighbourhoods safe and respectable, and for parents to 'choose' to work and be happy in their work. These grandiose pledges inflect the rhetoric of 'joined-up' government in the United Kingdom. Yet documents that outline workforce reform in the early years is where there is greatest intentionality (DfES, 2004a, b, c, 2005). Just as the young child is created as the saviour of future generations and national economic prosperity, the role of the ECEC professional is equally clear. Put simply, achievement of the New Labour societal vision relies upon the availability and quality of early childhood education and care – to ensure the young generation is taught 'correct' values; so that maternal employment is feasible; and so that citizenship rests upon credentialism, technical competence and economic activity.

With such a responsibility thrust upon them is it possible for this workforce to be considered anything other than 'professional'? What does 'professionalism' for this occupational group mean? What does it look like? Are there costs to professionalisation? – for whom, and what are the implications?

It is within this political and economic context and with these sorts of questions in mind that the foundations for this project in debating professionalism emerged. Opportunities and space to construct alternative discourses around the role of early childhood education and care as well as the role and positionality of those who work in the field were needed. As such, a seminar series entitled 'Re-thinking "Professionalism" in the Early Years' ran for a year (from 2004 to 2005) at London Metropolitan University. A range of key commentators readily accepted invitations to present their theorisations and research on and around this issue. The attendance far exceeded expectations and time to debate emergent issues and recurring themes was factored in to the half-day seminars. The papers were wide ranging and evocative. Academics from outside the ECEC community were invited to present to an audience comprised of ECEC researchers, lecturers, policy makers, students, practitioners, local authority officers, journalists and civil servants amongst others. The eclectic composition of the delegate body meant that discussions were as wide ranging and diverse as the perspectives and ideas presented.

Having opened up a space to deconstruct, debate and problematise the top-down professionalism agenda, the prospect of stopping the dialogue dead in its tracks was not an option. It was at this point that Sue Grieshaber welcomed the idea of a special issue from the UK on the issue of professionalism. The articles presented in this edition are diverse and the authors address the issue of professionalism from a range of perspectives.

In the first article, I seek to problematise the dominant construction of 'professionalism' as created and promoted by the UK Government through policy. By using a Foucauldian, post-structuralist feminist framework I outline the disempowering, regulatory gaze that early childhood professionals encounter. I argue that demands to meet externally imposed constructions of professionalism leave little time for practitioners to engage in meaningful critiques of the status quo. The dominance and perpetuation of rationality in early years practice is deconstructed to reveal the ways in which early years practitioners are regulated and controlled in their attempts to satisfy the demands for performativity and technicist practice. I conclude by presenting a discussion

of the vital and important role that agency plays and argue that practitioners are not passively shaped by social structure and that possibilities to negotiate and resist the regulatory gaze are possible.

As a welcome visitor to the world of ECEC, Helen Colley then takes learning cultures in further education as her site of analysis. She considers how nursery nurses in a further education college learn how to deploy and regulate emotion in their work with young children. Colley draws on feminist readings of Marx and Bourdieu to reveal how gendered and class-fractional positionings combine with vocational education and training to construct imperatives about 'correct' emotions in childcare. She theorises emotional capital and emotional labour to suggest that social rather than individualised understanding of how feelings are put to work is needed. Colley convincingly concludes by arguing that emotional labour carries costs for the nursery nurse, not because children consume her emotional resources, but because her emotional labour power is controlled and exploited for profit by employers.

Peter Moss considers the current ECEC policy in the United Kingdom and the centrality of the professionalism agenda, and in doing so he seeks to understand what forms change might take, both structurally and in terms of how the worker and her work is understood. By locating this national case in an international context, he argues for the need to connect restructuring with reconceptualisation to re-envision the ECEC workforce. By examining how understandings of the workforce are produced from different discourses and how different understandings relate to concepts of professionalism he proposes a politics of occupational identity and values that move beyond the dualistic 'non-professional/professional' divide. He concludes by arguing that although strong forces are involved, there is scope for contestation and change.

Julia Manning-Morton focuses on a localised case of the 'birth-to-three' professional. In her article Manning-Morton argues that in order to sufficiently meet the needs of very young children and thereby develop quality provision, early years practitioners must develop a professional approach that combines personal awareness with theoretical knowledge. She argues that the development of such abilities can be realised through process-oriented training over an extended period of time. She describes an example of this approach to provide an illustration of a process that impacted positively on practitioners' professional self-worth through valuing self-awareness in relation to the physical and emotional dimensions of practice.

Other welcome visitors to the ECEC field include Valorie Hey and Simon Bradford. Their article explores the contested and contradictory ways in which discourse and identity are played out in one Sure Start neighbourhood. The authors deconstruct and problematise a central tenet of the United Kingdom Government's approach to addressing the needs of young children and their families. The authors draw on data collected as part of an evaluation of a local Sure Start programme. They analyse New Labour's valorisation of parenting (specifically mothering) and assess the impact of Sure Start policy on discourses of motherhood in this context. Policy is considered as a form of knowledge and knowing, and the article looks at how policy opens up particular spaces of intervention whilst simultaneously configuring particular identities, in this case 'mothers'. Hey & Bradford propose that Sure Start has mapped a terrain upon which mothers' identities have been positioned in various discourses: 'responsibility', 'respectability' or 'fecklessness'.

Finally, Claire Cameron revisits and reframes her work on men in the nursery. She proposes that professionalising the workforce in terms of improving pay and conditions of work, and employing male workers can be seen as independent trends: there is no necessary relationship between the two. By extending the definition of professionalism to include scope and quality of practice, experiences and views of male and female workers make a vital contribution to our understandings. Cameron argues that the conditions necessary to change practices include developing a reflective approach where debate and curiosity are constant features of daily work.

In this special issue the key themes and concerns that have engaged the attention of the authors have been presented. It is worth highlighting that the collection of articles in this issue has been included because it reflects some critical views held by academics in the UK engaged in debates and research in the early years community at the current time. The aim of this edition of *CIEC* has been to provide a dialogic space to counter and challenge that which is occurring in public arenas. Academic debates in the United Kingdom have been invigorated by the current policy

attention to workforce reform, but not all commentators in the field of ECEC are willing or ready to critically engage with them. Other countries are further along with debates (and resolutions) about the interplay of policy and professionalism. Regardless of how advanced such conversations are, they are always dependent upon the cultural, historical, social and economic context. In the English context there has never been a more crucial moment for the ECEC community (in its broadest sense) to engage with, and contribute to, the debate. England has much to learn from international contexts, and academics have much to glean from others in the field. I hope that this edition of *CIEC* sets the scene for further dialogue about 'professionalism' in the early years.

References

- Ball, S. (2003) The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), pp. 215-228. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>
- Department for Education and Skills (2004a) *Every Child Matters: change for children*. London: Stationery Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (2004b) *Every Child Matters: next steps*. London: Stationery Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (2004c) *The Children Act*. London: Stationery Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Ten Year Strategy*. London: Stationery Office.
- Gewirtz, S. (2001) Cloning the Blairs: New Labour's programme for the re-socialisation of working-class parents, *Journal of Education Policy* 16(4): 365-378. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930110054353>
- Reay, D. (2001) Finding or Losing Yourself?: working-class relationships to education, *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(4), pp. 333-346. . <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930110054335>