

AU: Identifying professional functionings of early childhood educators ^[1]

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Excerpts from the abstract and introduction

Abstract

What does being a professional early childhood educator entail? This paper aims to address this question. Starting from the early 2000s, there has been increased attention to workforce professionalization in the early childhood education and care sector across OECD nations. Against the backdrop of recent early childhood workforce professionalization initiatives in Australia, and drawing on the Capability Approach to human development as an analytical framework, in this paper, we identify five evaluative spaces for assessing professional functionings: expertise, deliberation, recognition, responsiveness and integrity. We also argue that understanding what educators are actually able to be and do in their professional practices vis-à-vis policy expectations is instrumental in (a) identifying areas of professional learning needs, and (b) devising transformative learning experiences.

Introduction

From the late 2000s, Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector has passed through a series of reforms; with one of the key features of the reforms being a renewed interest in professionalizing early childhood educators. The professionalization agenda has been underpinned by a wider consensus on the positive link between quality services (e.g. learning and development of children) and staff professionalization (CoAG 2009, PC 2011, Cook et al. 2016). As stated in the national ECEC strategy (CoAG 2009), the reform movement is guided by the vision that by 2020 'all children will have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' (p. 4), and 'early childhood workers are valued and appropriately skilled according to best practice in quality and interdisciplinary service delivery' (p. 20, emphasis added). Our analytical interest is in the question: what does 'being valued and appropriately skilled' mean from the perspective of policy and practitioners? In other words, given that the ECEC workforce is diverse in terms of qualifications, experiences and positions within the organizational structures it is not clear how the professionalization agenda appeals to all members of the workforce in a range of educational and care contexts, including long day care (LDC), preschools, family day care, outside school hours care and occasional care services. Further, assessment of educator professionalization needs to take into account both policy provisions and educator experiences. This is for two main reasons: First, as educators navigate official expectations of their role, they rely heavily on what they value and choose to pursue in their pedagogic practices (Buckler 2016a). This implies that effective implementation of the professionalization initiative is mediated by subjective meaning systems of the educators and objective structures in the context of practices. Second, being professional is 'a performance, which is about what practitioners do at particular times, rather than a universal indication of who they are' (Osgood 2006, p. 12, emphasis in original). As such, the professionalization of early childhood (EC) educators should be measured in terms of what they are actually able to be and do rather than how they identify themselves or the amount of resources made available for professional development. This paper addresses this knowledge gap through answering the question: What constitutes valued and valuable professional beings and doings in the ECEC sector? In this paper, following Ingersoll, (Ingersoll et al. 1997, p. vii), the professionalization of educators refers to 'the movement to upgrade the status, training and working conditions' of individuals working directly with children in the ECEC sector.

Guided by the Capability Approach (CA) to human development, this paper explores the alignment of policy expectations and educator experiences in the area of professional functionings. In doing so, the paper reframes professional learning as capability expansion. The remaining part of the paper is organized in four sections. The first section deals with the analytical framework and methodology of the study. The second section covers educator professional functionings as captured in policy expectations and educator experiences. The third section briefly summarizes constraints of professional capabilities of EC educators, and draws implications for transformative professional learning programs. Finally, the concluding section presents key claims of the study.

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