

Reconceptualising and (re)forming early childhood professional identities: Ongoing transnational policy discussions ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

Introduction

The current COVID-19 crisis has caused us to revisit some fundamental issues of teacher identity. As we write, the ground is literally shifting under the feet of the profession in what could not have been conceived as the future for early childhood education (ECE). In this paper, we outline some of the reconceptualisations and (re)formations of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and teacher professionalism that have been exposed in relation to this crisis, and to our earlier writing. Even before COVID-19 struck, evolving issues around teacher professionalism raised some critical questions: What has become of the professional 'self'? Have we lost touch with a profession based on a fundamental ethics of care and encounter? What has happened to worthy wage and other campaigns focused on the well-being of teachers? Specifically, in light of these past months, what does this mean for (re)claiming a collective professional agency, in the face of diverse policy constructs, both during and after a world-wide COVID-19 pandemic?

This paper builds on our earlier writing where we asked what it means to be a professional teacher in the countries in which we were then located (Arndt et al., 2018). In that paper, teacher identities situated in neoliberal contexts were outlined and examined in relation to the notion of teacher selves being constantly in construction, using Kristeva's philosophy of the self and the foreigner as a theoretical lens (Kristeva, 1991, 1998). Since our writing of that paper the uncertainties raised appear only to have deepened, exacerbated most recently by crises far beyond, but deeply affecting, the control of early childhood teachers, educators, pedagogues and casual staff, their teaching, their selves, and the children in their various types of early childhood settings. Despite the lack of control, current issues, and specifically the international grappling with COVID-19, nevertheless deeply affect those who are at the frontline of ECEC. In what follows we focus on our current countries, to revisit the dialogues on the professional teaching self in this current crisis. In what ways is the professional status of those responsible for teaching the youngest children in Australia, the United States, Ireland and Denmark being impacted? Two years on from our previous dialogue, we reconfigure some of the ways in which new turmoils enmesh with policy shifts, pointing out that teachers (and others engaged in the teaching profession in early childhood settings) struggle in intricate ways in their engagements with and support of communities and family members dealing with the impacts of bushfires, drought, devastating border and immigration policies and most recently the deadly COVID-19 virus and its possible mutations.

Describing a professional ECEC teacher is complex and difficult. Among the uncertainties elevated in our earlier writing was the unknowability not only of the policy and curriculum surroundings in each of our localities, but of the self. An element of not knowing has arguably been exacerbated by the concerns that have evolved since our dialogues from two years ago. A deep sense of the unknown foreignness of the teacher-self permeates and is continually re-affected by the unknown foreignness of the policy climate in ECEC and beyond. That teachers remain in constant and open construction at the same time places them in various states of political limbo. Today, as we struggle against the invisible spread of a virus that has gripped and crippled the world, teachers already located within oppressive structures must rapidly re-question, re-think and re-develop ways of being to establish what it means to be a professional teacher, and what it means to teach in the possibly infected systems within which they live and work. Here we continue the dialogue through the lens of our contexts, beginning with recent developments in Australia, with a focus on the state of Victoria.

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