

Naming the early childhood professional

Artefacts, childish pursuits and critical questions

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This article addresses the problem of naming those who work with children in early childhood education setting. The article works through some perceived problems associated with shifting boundaries in the profession of early childhood teaching. In order to do so, it employs three artefacts that are quite familiar to early childhood centre communities. These artefacts give the discussion a sense of immediacy, and highlight the role that the immediate environment can play in opening up critical questions concerning the early childhood education teaching profession.

That the 'profession' is constantly shifting in its nature is evident in the update to the curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). In the update the term *kaiako* has been added to the entire curriculum – the 1996 version including the term only in the curriculum for *Kohanga Reo*. *Kaiako* now refers to “all teachers, educators and other adults, including parents in parent-led services, who have a responsibility for the care and education of children in an ECE setting” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7). Meanwhile Parliament has been asked to consider whether to ‘protect’ the term teacher through the Education (Protecting Teacher Title) Amendment Bill – a bill about which the Education Council (2018) expressed reservations on account of the perceived difference between a teacher and, the term preferred by the Council, a ‘registered teacher’.

At the same time, the updated curriculum says of children, that they:

... come into the world eager to learn and into family, whānau or ‘aiga that have high hopes for them. Teachers, educators and *kaiako* in ECE settings work together in partnership with the family to realise these hopes (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 6).

These subtle twists of the words that are carefully and intentionally employed to describe adults that work with children in early childhood education may seem somewhat trivial. However, they are anything but trivial

when exploring the deeper implications of their uses for the lived experiences of centre communities, and for the adults who work in these communities. An analysis of such language raises questions about child rearing, education, and professionalisation.

The idea of a profession of early childhood and care experts continues to be a challenge within the profession (Dalli & Urban, 2010; Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2012). A professional discourse constructs a boundary based on privileged knowledge – for instance, knowledge that child rearing is educational and that higher education is essential to understanding the nature of the professional role (Meade et al., 2012). However, there are many contending perspectives on what the profession should look like, and there are many perceived differentiations between professionals who are identified as teachers, and those who are identified as caregivers (O'Connor, McGunnigle, Treasure, & Davie, 2014). These differentiations have socioeconomic and political implications for the early childhood professional and the profession (Ailwood, 2018; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012; Osgood, 2012). Most importantly, those who work with children in early childhood centres experience some longstanding, and some new, forms of domesticisation that challenge the idea that the profession enjoys much of the supposed status that being a professional is supposed to bring.

In this article, the artefacts that may be familiar to early childhood centre communities are employed to focus on particular questions and issues. The use of these ‘things’ provides context and method for the analysis. They include: children’s literature; the game of *hop-scotch*; and the iPad application *Endless Numbers*. Using these tools invites the idea that early childhood centre communities are rich in devices for challenging what is taken for granted about early childhood education, and the contemporary shifting landscape of the early years of education as evident in recent news media policy and research publications.

Hopscotch, progress and technocracy

In the 19th century, Crombie conducted an anthropological study on the game of hopscotch which showed that the game had ancient roots. In Crombie's analysis (1886, p. 408) the ancient hopscotching child enjoyed the "wanderings of the soul in a future state". In the Christian tradition, the image of a labyrinth is replaced by the more orderly, squared, representations of the progress of the soul through various states of spiritual being. Each square to hop through was a state rather than, as known now, a number. These earlier manifestations of the game highlight the prioritisations for children's education at their respective times.

That the modern child typically jumps through numbered squares might be interpreted as evidence of their increasingly metric lives – lives made up of accumulations of all sorts of data. The child's future is in this sense an enumerated journey that parallels their learning math during the game of hopscotch. From the mysterious hopping about towards an unknown future, to the hop and skip of an eternally saved or damned self, we have moved to a neo-bureaucratic management of a child's development.

Gazing away from the child's play, we can see a family role transforming through deeper layers of the game's purposeful governance of the child – the extraction of the maximum value of hopscotch. This extraction of value is apparent in governance of child rearing, both through the family and the early childhood profession. The OECD's 'Starting Strong' series provides evidence of the kind of game of progress that children are hopping through. The OECD's series of early childhood educational interventions are aimed at rationalising and enhancing early educational qualities within a context of 'productivity' that makes it possible to use the phrase 'babies and bosses' (OECD, 2004) in a public domain. The series of reports have been followed up with intensified measuring of children through early childhood assessment programmes promoted around the world (see for instance Pence, 2016) – but currently being resisted in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The OECD work on policy development requires questioning in relation to how an understanding of, and intentions for, early childhood care and education creates and shifts boundaries for family and professional responsibility and for the range of possible aspirations for a young child's care and education. For instance 'good' parents are increasingly constructed as desiring to send their child to a professional early childhood environment where the adults know best. Paradoxically, not only are these parents consumers of early childhood services, they are also constructed as critical to the quality of that service. The OECD (2012, p. 220) notes that parental involvement in ECE is a "fundamental right and obligation". The professional is then the expert who demands the labour of the parent to create the right kind of educational environment. Given the increasing hours of a young child's life given over to the professional, the family capacity to

know and shape these rights and obligations wanes. The role of policy is then to 'lever' the profession and the family together, a leverage that is made palatable by the assumption that while the family should know the child best, the professional teacher is an expert in child-rearing, up to date with, and able to deploy, the latest research on child development and on early childhood curriculum.

However, in Aotearoa/New Zealand policy developments including the reduction of funding incentives for fully qualified teaching staff, and the plan to exclude early childhood teacher education from proposed postgraduate initial teacher education (see May, 2014), are evidence of limits to the esteem of the profession and in particular of its champions within the academy. The entire sector, teachers, the academy and ECE businesses has been under fire in recent media debate (Gerritsen, 2018; Woulfe, 2014a, 2014b) in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In these debates, the quality of service provided by the sector has been challenged, and the right of the profession to call itself expert undermined. Gender is one critical factor to consider in this challenging of the profession.

The Tiger That Came To Tea

In the children's story *The Tiger That Came To Tea* a young girl and her mother are interrupted by an uninvited tiger who eats all the tea on the table and then clears out the larder and the fridge too. The tiger is a reminder of the absence of the father. The absence of the father in the family is a narrative of intervention. Children without fathers, so the story goes, need the intervention of early childhood services in order to grow up in the 'right' kind of supportive heteronormatively gendered environment (see for instance the Early Childhood Council, 2013). This kind of very problematic narrative goes further, and becomes even more problematic in its understanding of gender. The early childhood profession is itself regarded as without a sufficient paternal sway. The profession is talked about as if it is too feminised and so the familial-professional partnership is characterised as deficient on account of the absence of men. This criticism of the profession's gender imbalance is itself rather imbalanced by a weak understanding (at best) and a particular normalisation of gender (Sumison, 2005). In addition a failure to address the wider historical, social, economic and political drivers that influence such apparent imbalances.

Davis (2010) tracks the 'feminine profession' through various pedagogical iterations, singling out the kindergarten and progressive early childhood education movements for their various interpretations and models of the feminine teacher – from innate care-giver to formally trained child psychologist. While the characteristics may vary, they have cumulatively constructed the profession and its very complex and disputatious identity.

These movements have not, however, led to any new understanding of the longstanding gendered boundaries between caring and education, and to the competing views on who the early childhood teacher *is*. Their legacy

is perhaps to keep polemics, distrust and power at the centre of the early childhood policy community through which pedagogical factions clamour for their evidence and/or philosophy, and their construction of the good teacher. Davis notes, “contemporary policy debates ... seem fated to rehearse the same controversies and the same struggles for legitimate authority” (2010, pp. 289–290). A key element in this fruitless and unwinnable contest is a reticence to consider the deeper tensions between private and public spheres and by the agendas of the governments whose favour is sought by competing educational ideologies. The changeable and complex political boundary making perpetually redefines the early childhood professional identity – while redefining is itself not necessarily a problem, who is doing the pushing, in the interests of whom, and for what effect? These questions are necessary in order to: make sense of the impact of an epistemological boundary between the profession and the community (particularly in terms of what knowledge is marginalised); reveal the professionalised technologies of intervention into the institution of the family (Smeyers, 2008, 2010a, 2010b); and to explore the ways in which other related boundaries impact on child-rearing – for instance the very idea of the privacy of the home (Derrida, 2000).

The economy of early childhood education is a complex screen behind which the tensions of low pay and good business operate in tacit complicity with public perception

Davis, citing Arendt from her essay on education, notes that rather than enhancing the capacity of the profession, the early education profession loses its sense of “responsibility for the world” (2010, p. 298) when it is the object of increased surveillance and governance. He challenges that the profession is increasingly and problematically an “insidious and unaccountable technology of governance active in the subtle, covert reconstruction of the public, the private, and the boundaries between them” (2010, p. 298).

Does the profession then sustain itself on the resources of the family home, whether it is welcome or not? I think it is unreasonable to presume that the profession is not considerate of the notion of partnerships with families – it is certainly rhetorically aware of the problem of being an unwelcome guest (see for instance ECE Taskforce, 2011). The concern here is the very construction of the early childhood teaching profession and the ways in which it is self-critical.

Are teachers sensitive to this ebb and flow that continues

to shape the boundaries of the profession? Should the profession keep in mind its nature as a mechanism within a wider disciplinary apparatus that takes advantage of the early years of learning as a function of controlling the freedoms of the social world and the future ‘life chances’ of the child? This idea of the future is the focus of the final ‘toy’, exploring the professional influence of the era of ‘cool capitalism’ and its fast flows of electronically mediated knowledge (Loveless & Williamson, 2013).

Apply iPad liberally

‘Endless numbers’ is free iPad application for children’s early education that makes more mobile the success of products like ‘My Baby Can Read’ and ‘Baby Mozart’. The product is an excellent example of the construction of educational anxiety and the rush to plug children in to educational advantage. These pressures connect the family and the profession through the kind of deterministic evidenced-based thinking that associates good games, good play, good teaching and good home-centre partnerships with better life chances (see for instance Woulfe, 2014b). The interest here is not whether the evidence is good regarding both the quality of the application and its causal relationship with the universally agreed good life, but rather with the application of new knowledge about early childhood education’s critical role at particular times of a child’s life. There are drivers of this knowledge. The economy of early childhood education is a complex screen behind which the tensions of low pay and good business operate in tacit complicity with public perception. Early education is endless business opportunity whether through the numbers of sales of presumed vital toys or through the numbers that float around about children’s best development.

For teachers, it is not the numbers that are endless but rather the debates about best practice that endlessly reproduce knowledge on development and pedagogy. The professional teacher is expected to have her eyes glued to her twitter account should a new professional fact become fashionable and then regulated. One of the very fashionable but highly problematised twitterings around early childhood is the use of new electronic media. The rolling out of new media into the early childhood teacher’s curriculum is loaded with assumptions of the profession’s ‘low-tech hi-touch’ stigma (Gibbons, 2007; Gibbons, 2008). iPad applications are one example of a contemporary anxiety that is quickly being associated with lost opportunity.

Child-rearing professionals engage with the problem of the promise of the future, the problem with the anxiousness that we have in relation to the idea of a life lived meaningfully (Camus, 1991). This kind of anxiety steers the teacher towards a unified technical determinism, and away from the idea of a professional ‘care’. Care is critical to partnership. However caring partnerships should remain quite skeptical of any illusions of better technologically determined futures. While the profession as expert and technician has little to do with partnership, there is some other kind of professional identity, a shared and open idea that resonates with the work of Camus on absurdity,



Opening the immediate environment to critical scrutiny opens creative spaces for inquiry and insight.

resistance and polemics, and that hears the concerns of Arendt on the tensions between private and public spheres.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to question the kind of thinking that entrenches the profession. The entrenchment is an epistemological error, a weak response to an apparatus that asks only certain questions. The point is not to drop the profession, but rather look at opportunities to engage in professional questioning – and that's where the devices have a role to play, as they offer provocations that invite questions, and encourage in particular exploring what has become taken for granted about the early childhood teaching profession.

Davis wonders about the possibility of a future “genuine and enduring embrace of infancy as a communitarian locus of caring relations between adults and children” (2010, p. 298). He says we need to ask serious questions and wider debate about who is involved, he says ‘relative jurisdictions’ ... the question of course is then going to include how to ensure we are all at all times interested in this question, whether we are parents, business owners, government officials, academics, and of course children.

The nature of the professional in early childhood education will continue to cause headaches. Rhetoric, policy, and experience are in constant tension. The profession is told it has no real power or authority, with its low status and poor pay, and stressful working conditions, at the same time as it is told that its status is based on a problematic expert knowledge, a knowledge that privileges “certain ways of seeing things to the detriment of other possible understandings” (Smeyers, 2010b, p. 284).

These headaches don't just face the profession as a whole, they are in the face of each and every adult, each and every day, whether that professional be named kaiako, teacher, or caregiver. They are debates that don't necessarily require solutions, as they are too complex to solve, however they do require questioning. In order to question one's professional identity, we need an open, caring and creative place in which we work, and this includes the work of learning about teaching.

The work to be done here is a kind of professional narrative that keeps a careful eye on the boundaries that are created between teacher, adult, kaiako, parent and, of course, child. Most importantly, how do we take care to explore these boundaries without resorting to the kinds of naïve exclusivity that determines who can and cannot play this professional game. It's naïve because, most importantly, it's a game that always implicates everyone.

So there is some work to do here to negotiate out of a blind alley in which the governing of the profession is expressed in terms of honouring but acts in ways that marginalise, demean, deprive and exploit teachers, adults, kaiako, and parents. The role of the profession is a critical and careful distrust of the boundaries that appear and that are employed, including family-centre boundaries, qualification boundaries, developmental boundaries, research boundaries, and pedagogical boundaries, and a critical and careful trust that builds rather than divides the community on account of these boundaries. This is not to suggest that the boundaries should be dissolved and that everyone involved should be all things at all times but rather that we attend to how we negotiate these complex boundaries.

Teacher education is one space to develop a relationship to this kind of professional role, however teacher education can also be highly divisive; a site of academic positioning, disciplinary self-interest, and muddled obligations. The final point to this paper is then to ensure that teacher education and teacher educators critically question the varied and complex problems associated with the professionalization of early childhood education, through the study of teaching, and with the student teacher.

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