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Knowledge, practice, and the shaping of early childhood professionalism

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Knowledge, practice, and the shaping of early childhood professionalism

Abstract

This article argues for an early childhood professionalism based upon notions of professional community and professional knowledge. Professionalism is conceived here as shaped by the relation between the social and the epistemic, with certain types of professional knowledge given precedence in accordance with the involvement of different organisations, institutions and public bodies. It is argued that shared processes that recognise the validity of certain types of knowledge for practice are required in order to advance early childhood professionalism, and that this requires forms of sociality that are derived from disciplinary communities but are often adopted, and adapted, by professionalised occupations. Drawing primarily on English examples, but with reference to other European countries, the development of the types of professional community that could advance professionalism is seen as challenged by the fragmented nature of the early childhood workforce, organisational diversity and the role of government.

Keywords: professionalism, professional knowledge, evidence-based practice, early childhood professionals, ECEC systems.

Introduction

Early childhood education and Care (ECEC) has increasingly become the subject of national and supranational policy and research in European countries in recent time. European Commission communications have echoed the OECD (2006) document ‘Starting Strong’ by positing ECEC as the ‘essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability’ (EC 2011, 1), putting ever greater emphasis on the role of ECEC in enhancing individual life chances and in achieving various social and economic objectives. This has, arguably, resulted in substantial changes in the conception of early childhood professionalism, as increased governmental interest has resulted in some countries in greater specification of professional standards and pathways to qualification (Oberheumer 2005; Oberheumer et al. 2010). In those countries where there has been centrally-driven reform those involved in the formation of professionals, including educational institutions, professional associations and employers, have often been required to align with forms of ‘welfare’ or ‘governmental’ (Beck 2009) professionalism, and to increasingly promote conceptualisations of early childhood work that reflect other dominant ‘social welfare’ or ‘educational’ models (Hordern 2013). It can be argued that such centrally driven modes of professionalism can be used to control and discipline practice (Fournier 1999; Osgood 2006), while potentially also affording elements of status and recognition (Miller 2008). Equally, forms of central direction, when coupled with inspection regimes and the cultures of managerialism they may promote, can provide the groundwork for elements of ‘organisational’ professionalism (Evetts 2004), in which the employer’s mode of operation becomes a template for the recontextualisation of certain modes of professionalism into practitioners’ individual contexts. In countries with established or growing ‘for profit’ private sector early childhood provision (i.e. UK, Ireland or the Netherlands) (Penn 2013), this may be particularly extensive, engendering ‘corporate’ approaches to professionalism (Muzio et al. 2011). This heady mix of ‘government’ and ‘organisation’ invites bureaucratic and market logics that sit in opposition to the traditions of justified autonomy and expertise that have characterised classical forms of professionalism, at least in the anglosphere (Friedson 2001).

It can be difficult for early childhood professionals to extend their autonomy and creativity when ECEC is receiving increasing attention from policy makers convinced that improving educational outcomes before children start school has considerable economic and societal benefits. This policy-driven pressure may militate against the development of ‘ground-up’

(Dalli 2008), 'democratic' (Oberheumer 2005) or agency-orientated models (Simpson 2010) of professionalism amongst early childhood practitioners, which in any case are not, in themselves, sufficient to advance professional knowledge and occupational control. Abbott (1988) identifies that all occupations operate within systems in which they struggle for jurisdiction and control over the nature of their work, and this struggle is influenced by factors such as the nature of the knowledge base, government intervention, professional organisation and changing working practices. Just as importantly, professional work requires a knowledge base that is both 'articulable' and a 'collective asset' (Clark and Winch 2004, 513) as professionals require shared understandings of practice to communicate and co-operate, both with each other and with others. Therefore, recognition of early childhood professionalism needs to be 'public' as well as 'private', with other stakeholders (including government, employers, parents, and other professionals) accepting the professional dimension of early childhood practice, but the conditions for this are as much about internal organisation as external relations.

This article aims to develop a conception of early childhood professionalism that is grounded in an understanding of the importance of professional community and professional knowledge. Professionalism is shaped by relations between employing organisations, associations, educational institutions and governments, who may have variable levels of authority to specify and stipulate the tone of professionalism, entry paths to the profession, and how routes to professional qualifications are designed. Concomitantly, professionalism is shaped by conceptions of the kinds of knowledge that are considered valuable for professional practice. These forms of knowledge may include theories of early childhood learning and related expositions of those theories in practice, or, in contrast, reductive 'technical' constructions of standards or competencies that serve to aid evaluative mechanisms. Because of the level of government interest in early years work, it is argued that developing the capability to manage and influence government objectives is a key function of the professional community, but this cannot be achieved without a sufficiently shared conception of knowledge and professionalism. A conception of early childhood professionalism that is attuned to the significance both of the social and the epistemic is briefly sketched, drawing on the work of the sociologist Basil Bernstein and those ascribing to a social realist school of the sociology of educational and professional knowledge.

Professionalism and professional learning: context and a ‘shared conception’ of knowledge

Notions of professionalism are inextricable from how professional knowledge and learning is conceived, including the manner in which propositional and tacit knowledge is foregrounded and related in structures of professional formation, qualifications and models of professional competence (Eraut 1994; Guile 2010; Winch 2010). Professionals in formation may have opportunities to learn in educational settings and in workplaces of various types, on their own, and from a diverse group of other people, including peers, more experienced practitioners and teachers (Eraut 2007; Billett 2008). Although patterns and pathways of formation vary, learning is always influenced by the context in which it is located (Unwin et al. 2007; Felsted et al. 2009). This notion of context includes the extent and type of influence exercised by a range of actors, including employing organisations, professional associations, educational institutions and governments, in addition to wider socio-cultural and historical norms and conventions that have emerged and evolved over time. Unwin et al.’s (2007) metaphor of the ‘Russian Doll’, with layers of contextual influence from the macro through the meso to the micro level, reminds us of the multi-faceted and systemic nature of the context of formation, with changes in influence in one layer having causation elsewhere that may remain imperceptible to those whom it affects.

Such a systemic model implies a potential for instability, particularly for those in occupations which lack the social infrastructure of professional institutions or communities that are able to interpret social, technological, political and economic change, and if necessary act to rework and adapt professionalism and professional formation to meet revised requirements. Without a social and technical infrastructure reinforced by productive relations between institutions, employers and professional associations, it is difficult for those within an occupational community to adequately resist changes that external bodies seek to impose, often leaving processes of formation and notions of professionalism weakened (Felstead et al. 2009; Hordern 2013). In such ‘weakened’ situations, particular notions of knowledge and learning that suit the ideologies or priorities of external bodies, but do not necessarily cohere with conceptions of professionalism adhered to by the professional community, can become prevalent. It can be argued that a professional community can become so accustomed to the process of external specification of knowledge and learning that its capacity to conceive and enact alternatives becomes limited, leading potentially to a relationship of dependence on those external bodies that have the power to stipulate a specific model of professionalism.

From the sociology of the professions we can also observe the extent to which the maintenance of professional jurisdiction (Abbott 1988), or control over a slice of the ever-changing pie of work, is dependent on the capacity to negotiate with other professions, governments and clients. Jurisdiction is also reliant on the capacity of the profession to justify claims to expertise in the face of challenge from other organised professional groups or those wielding bureaucratic authority (Abbott 1988; Friedson 2001). Claims to expertise necessitate a degree of consensual agreement around the knowledge and identity that is represented by the professional community. This shared conception of knowledge enables articulation of professional practice amongst fellow professionals engaged in the same or similar tasks (Clark and Winch 2004), and with other stakeholders. Without a shared conception, it is difficult to construct coherent arguments that advance forms of professional formation and expertise and to maintain jurisdiction, both in negotiations with other professional groups and with public bodies. If there are limited opportunities for discussion between actors within a community as to what constitutes professional knowledge this shared conception may not emerge or be sustained. Equally, if dialogue is not maintained over time, plausible strategies for how knowledge may need to be revised and renewed over time cannot be put in place. Furthermore, it can be argued that the professional community needs to achieve some agreement on which forms of knowledge, or disciplinary traditions, have particular value for the professional knowledge base, and that the identification, conservation and ongoing review of that knowledge base is a worthwhile pursuit. Without some agreement that certain types of knowledge have particular value (Young 2006; Muller 2009; Young and Muller 2010), it is difficult to see how any form of shared conception could arise.

In the field of early years practice, where we have seen increasing national and supra-national involvement in the development of curriculum frameworks and workforce strategies at national and supra-national levels in many European countries (EU 2011; Oberheumer et al. 2010), relations between the professional community, its organisations and government are crucial factors in the selection, appropriation and transformation of various types of knowledge for early childhood professional education. At this relationship nexus we find particular models of knowledge and learning advanced that imply particular models of professionalism. In contexts where governments set the terms of the relationship and the professional community has limited influence, then we may find professional frameworks that mirror particular political concerns, perhaps reducing the time and curriculum space for those aspects of professional knowledge that may be prioritised by the broader professional

community. Urban emphasises the ‘highly stratified’ nature of ECEC in many national contexts, and the ‘epistemological hierarchy’ which enables a ‘powerful top-down stream of knowledge’ (2008, 140-141), leaving practitioners with no influence on the knowledge base. Officially sanctioned forms of knowledge are implicated in such structures, Urban suggests, as part of an ‘effective means of control and regulation of diverse individual practice’ (2008, 140).

In contrast, where we see more equitable and inclusive modes of engagement between national authorities and the profession, hierarchies and separations may be less apparent. For example, professionalism in many European countries has historically been conceived as inextricable from state regulation and support (Torstendahl and Burrage 1990). In these scenarios, we may also find that the pace of change is less rapid as the professional community has sufficient influence within government to negotiate and mitigate any desired political change. Thus, the capacity for the ECEC profession to negotiate, adapt and co-ordinate with the state, and to invest in forms of ‘special relations’ (Kinos 2008, 238) may be particularly prevalent in those European countries with more state-orientated consensual traditions, with an impact on the extent to which the professional community has the capacity to publically articulate its professional knowledge. Where there is a commitment to ‘conceptualise early childhood professionals within a wider perspective’ (Oberheumer 2005, 10) as we have seen in Denmark and Sweden, a systemic perspective is engendered that foregrounds ‘shared understandings of childhood, knowledge, learning and care’ (10) to shape beneficial social relations across institutions in the broader professional community. Of course, it can also be argued that the subjugation of ECEC policy and practice to economic models with origins in Anglo-American capitalism are also facilitating greater Anglo-American influences on ECEC professionalism throughout Europe (Kinos 2008), and this may challenge such models. Forms of professionalism in the Anglo-American tradition have foregrounded autonomy and capacity to self-regulate, and there has been considerable resistance from some professions to state intervention (Friedson 2001). Professional prestige in this tradition is primarily attributable through greater distance from the state, demonstrated through effective self-governance. This does not necessarily mean that constructive partnerships between professions and the state are not possible in such societies. It may, however, suggest that governments in such societies may be less adept in supporting the professionalism of groups that operate within the welfare state framework (i.e. teachers,

social workers), viewing these groups as somehow ‘lesser’ professionals because they rely on the state for their work *and* their professional authority.

Work in the sociology of knowledge has started to develop a conception of the development of professional knowledge that asserts the importance of knowledge structure as much as the social relations in academic or professional communities discussed above (Muller 2009; Young 2006). Building on the work of Basil Bernstein, and drawing insights from Durkheim, Vygostky and others (Young 2003), this school of thought suggests that types of knowledge have distinct structures that relate to the social context in which they are produced (Bernstein 1999), and that certain types of knowledge possess ‘rules of combination’ that have the capacity to provide a conceptual coherence to the knowledge base (Muller 2009), which in turn enables better understanding and action within the varied contexts of professional work . An important aspect of this, particularly for professional knowledge, is the extent to which various dimensions of ‘know how’ are just as crucial for professional practice as the ‘know that’ propositional knowledge set out explicitly within the knowledge base (Winch 2010; Muller 2012). The argument presented suggests that certain types of knowledge are intrinsically more valuable, in that they offer those that engage with them access to ways of thinking beyond their immediate contexts. These types of knowledge originate and are sustained by communities of academic and professional practitioners committed to the iteration of the disciplinary or professional knowledge base, providing a form of knowledge ‘quality assurance’ through peer review mechanisms that also enable the review and conservation of the historical development of thought (Muller 2009).

Professional communities have often built social structures modelled on those of the academic disciplines, enabling the exercise of judgement about the forms of knowledge content that are particularly important for the professional knowledge base. Exemplars might include in particular the professional communities of Medicine, Law or Engineering, where higher education, professional associations and employers have developed close collaborations often to mutual benefit. This enables professional communities to draw on disciplinary knowledge to develop the professional knowledge base. In Bernstein’s (2000) terms, the ‘pure’ academic disciplines are ‘recontextualised’ to constitute ‘regions’ of professional knowledge to meet the ‘supervening purpose’ of practice (Muller 2009, 213). This process involves a ‘principle that selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order’ (Bernstein 2000, 33), as knowledge is taken from one context and altered and reordered to meet the needs of another. However, the

process of recontextualisation requires the involvement of ‘agents’ (Bernstein 2000, 33) who are capable of engaging in this process in ways that benefit professional practice. As Barnett identifies, the consequent knowledge base needs to ‘face both ways’(2006, 152), both to disciplinary knowledge and to the changing imperatives of practice, and this involves various ‘agents’ within the ‘region’ co-operating to define and agree what these imperatives are so that knowledge can be produced and recontextualised.

Knowledge fallibility and practice uncertainties

This is not, it should be said, a model that ascribes to an inherently conservative view of knowledge. Disciplinary communities, and the knowledge they produce, are seen as inherently fallible and dynamic (Bernstein 2000; Young and Muller 2010), subject to the profanities of individual and group agendas and the dangers of rogue theories. However, the notion of an academic or professional community which collectively makes a judgement on the quality of a knowledge claim, based on past and present knowledge, is seen as the most effective way of sustaining the types of ‘powerful knowledge’ that can offer insight into the human condition, and engagement with the challenges facing humanity (Wheelahan 2007; Young 2008). It is the power of well-developed abstract conceptualisation, located within a tradition of knowledge and with the potential to take students beyond the confines of their immediate experiences, which offers the best foundation for modern education, and professional or vocational formation (Wheelahan 2010). The approach acknowledges the importance of critically exposing where specific power relations and imbalances have served to silence or neglect valuable developments in knowledge, and thus advocates the constant review of the disciplinary and professional tradition, based on the strength of knowledge claims. On the other hand, the approach specifically rejects what are seen as relativizing approaches that offer to ascribe all knowledge types with the same value on the grounds that the prominence of certain types of disciplinary knowledge is solely due to the historical potency of particular privileged ‘voices’ based on class, gender or ethnicity. From the social realist perspective, certain social contexts of production provide the commitment both to ‘truth’ and to ‘truthfulness’ (Young and Muller 2007), and therefore develop the processes and structures that can offer a better quality of insight than those contexts which (i) foreground versions of ‘the truth’ without truthfulness (i.e. very often cultural imperialists or social conservatives) or (ii) those that foreground ‘truthfulness’ or critical engagement without believing in truth (i.e. postmodern and relativist perspectives) (Young and Muller 2010).

The 'differentiated' nature of knowledge conceived here has implications for early childhood professionalism. Although knowledge produced in the context of practice may have value, this is surely conditional on the existence of the social relations within the wider professional community that can support the recognition of this value, discerning valid contributions to the professional body of knowledge. Without 'epistemically-rich' notions of professional practice there are risks that 'folk theories' of 'what works', based on the hunches or preferences of individual practitioners, are able to gain considerable currency. Winch et al. (2013, 6), examining teachers' professional knowledge, identify that 'reliance on common sense', where there is limited engagement with research-based knowledge, can lead to the use of 'folk maxims' as proxies for well-grounded theory. This may be particularly prevalent in professions where there is a lack of consensus and shared mechanisms for establishing the validity of knowledge. The history of early childhood education and care demonstrates the importance of research work which is both proximate to and distant from practice in developing a body of knowledge that can support substantive improvements in children's well-being. For example, the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, while challenged and iterated subsequently, would not have arisen to prominence and had impact on early childhood practice without the existence of processes that ascribed certain types of knowledge with value and significance, or without effective processes of recontextualisation within professional communities. Thus there is a danger in relying on '*making sense* of uncertain situations' (Urban 2008, 144) without any socio-epistemic infrastructure in the professional community that can identify what that 'sense' might be. As Winch et al. (2013, 5) imply, echoing Gramsci, there needs to be ways of delineating between 'common sense' and 'good sense'. Popular approaches such as Schon's (1983) celebrated model of reflective professional practice are therefore valid only in certain conditions, where processes of reflection are supported by a framework of professional knowledge and understanding that may, in certain professions, be so 'taken for granted' as to be indiscernible. Otherwise, and here is the fallacy promoted by a relativist conception of knowledge, all forms of reflection and insight can be afforded validity.

Much government intervention in shaping early childhood professionalism implies certainty and clarity, as Urban (2008) notes, with reference to the English context during the New Labour period. However, recognition of the 'messy business' (Urban 2008, 144) or inherent uncertainties of early childhood practice surely does not necessarily lead to the dismissal of all forms of expertise (i.e. Urban 2008, 147). While government documents may present a

flawed and decontextualized conception of professional knowledge, there are equal dangers in asserting that forms of individualised or highly localised ‘knowing’ should take precedence over the development of a shared knowledge base. While there may be much contextual diversity in practice, there are plenty of ‘common problems’ across ECEC which require a ‘common pedagogical competence’ (Vrinioti 2013, 152), based on the best available knowledge. In the realist tradition outlined above, this knowledge should be seen as ‘fallible’, but yet valuable if produced in conditions that recognise the potential for truth and value truthfulness (Young and Muller 2007).

In the light of these arguments, there may be two problems specific to the early childhood professional community, relating firstly to excessive government intervention, and secondly to a lack of the socio-epistemic conditions for the conservation, iteration and review of a professional knowledge base that provides for the purposes of practice. The two problems are clearly related; when the professional community is weakened or fragmented, governments have free reign to construct forms of professional knowledge through the hierarchical structures that Urban (2008) describes. However, to conflate criticisms of forms of ‘evidence-based’ knowledge production and validation with government prescription (Urban 2008, 140-141) may be misconceived. While government may be exploiting the assumptions and certainties that ‘evidence-based practice’ offers, this does not mean that governments, or positivist researchers, have a monopoly on conceptions of evidence or valuable knowledge. As Urban indicates (2008, 148-149) there are examples in a number of national contexts where these monopolies do not exist; it is thus at a ‘systemic’ (148) level that professionalism is conceived and sustained.

Social relations and recontextualisation within the professional community

If we examine a range of national contexts within Europe we can identify different notions of how a professional community of early years professionals should be structured or organised. To a considerable extent this is influenced by expectations of what early years professionals should be expected to do and know, which, in turn, is structured by conceptions of early years education and childhood itself (Moss 2000; Oberheumer 2005), and by the level of integration and coherence in the national ECEC system (Penn 2013; Oberheumer, Schreyer and Neumann 2010).

The role of professional associations has also been identified as a key factor in guiding a profession through change (Greenwood et al. 2002), adapting the role of the professional to

fit changing requirements, and shaping, legitimating and revitalising the professional knowledge base (Nerland and Karseth 2013), in addition to advocating in policy forums on behalf of the profession. Millerson (1964, 28-30) determined that the 'primary functions' of professional 'qualifying' associations were '(1) to organise', '(2) to qualify', '(3) to further study of a subject and communicate information obtained', '(4) to register competent professionals' and '(5) to promote and preserve a high standard of professional conduct' . This indicated, in (3), the vital role of the professional association in recontextualising knowledge for the purposes of practice, on grounds with foreshadow Abbott's (1988) elaboration of the key role of professional knowledge as a source of solutions to emerging problems. Unilateral control of the knowledge base by a professional association may however jeopardise processes whereby the knowledge base is continually scrutinised, improved and reviewed, processes which are likely to be best enacted with the engagement of higher education institutions and practitioners. Thus, adequate links between professional associations, higher education, and practitioners can be seen as crucial for the effective selection appropriation and transformation of knowledge from one context to another (Hordern 2014), enabling the broader professional community to 'own' the knowledge base through the execution of their various roles.

However in certain ECEC systems, forms of professional association that provide the conditions for a coherent professional knowledge base may be difficult to achieve. For example, the highly privatised and fragmented nature of ECEC in the U.K. (Penn 2013) makes professional association difficult, and the fulfilment of any of Millerson's (1964) 'primary functions' problematic. With thousands of employers and sole practitioners, in an enormous range of settings and with varied qualifications, finding common ground is extremely challenging. In such an environment professional associations may be marginalised in processes of establishing the professional knowledge base and valid structures of professional formation, forced to contribute to government-sponsored reviews via consultation mechanisms with no guarantee that their voices will be heeded. The array of bodies that seek to represent different roles, different interests, and aspects of professional development within the early childhood sector in England (i.e PACEY; UKCMA ; TACTYC; Early Education; Pre-school learning alliance) may struggle to find a common voice to claim greater ownership over early childhood professional formation. Each may play a role in providing aspects of representation, association or professional education, but different professional communities may be served in ways that foreground different conceptions of

knowledge and practice. This fragmentation can be contrasted with the situation in countries where early childhood provision is (i) predominantly state-led and (ii) clearly part of the Education or Welfare system (i.e Denmark, Finland, France) although this may vary by child age (Penn 2013). In such systems practitioners usually obtain a licence to practice regulated by the state and have access to forms of association and representation that are supported by clear, publically recognisable, professional identities.

In the English context professional bodies in the field of early childhood have some influence in shaping the nature of qualification and professional recognition, but this is undeniably weak in comparison with the influence of government. UK governments have tended to shape early childhood professionalism to fit the specific initiatives and policies they wish to promote. During the New Labour era we saw how the children's workforce strategy was introduced to complement Every Child Matters (DCSF 2008), and the introduction of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), as part of efforts to integrate services, move beyond the boundaries between notions of 'education' and 'care', and professionalise the workforce. On the other hand, the current Coalition government quickly replaced EYPS with Early Years Teachers (EYT) who must meet newly devised Teaching Standards (DfE 2013b) and focus on 'readying children for school and, eventually, employment' (DfE 2013a, 6), moves that can be seen as part of a broader education policy that advocates a return to traditional schooling and foregrounds preparation for the rollercoaster of the 'global race'.

Concomitantly, the increasing concern at a supra-national and national level with the organisation and provision of early childhood education and care may militate against the sustainable development of professional association and the networks needed to support professional formation by politicising ECEC policy and system change. For example, recent political activity in the UK has demonstrated the tendency of politicians to view ECEC policy as a potential vehicle for gaining voter share (Hope 2013). If these are short term policy interventions that may be subject to future reversal they are unlikely to be beneficial for the development of the professional communities advocated above.

If disciplinary and research knowledge, and its relation to practice, are important in professionalism then the role of higher education, and the link between higher education and professional bodies, is of vital concern. The development of the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network in the U.K. in the 1990s, and the Quality Assurance Agency benchmark statement setting out the characteristics of higher education courses in the field, advanced the standing of the study of Early Childhood as a 'developing academic area' which was

‘essentially interdisciplinary’ and would ‘provide the base for professional education and training’ (QAA 2007, 1). Strong links remain across many higher education institutions, and between higher education institutions and employers. Academic journals which feature research into and for practice are of course a considerable asset in developing a professional knowledge base. From the social realist perspective outlined above it is important for structures within the professional community to demonstrate commitment to both the potential for truth and the importance of ‘truthfulness’, while admitting the fallibility and foregrounding the inherent sociality of knowledge. Whereas many of the traditional disciplines enjoy minimal external influence on their internal processes of knowledge validation, it can be argued that the field of Early Childhood is subject to powerful external influences which are inherent in the nature of professionalising fields that have strong governmental involvement. Although there are parallels in England with the experience of teaching (i.e. Beck 2002, 2009), early childhood has the additional challenge of the fragmented and diverse nature of its workforce and employment settings (Penn 2013; Oberhuemer et al. 2010). Where employment contexts are so varied and have substantive bearing on work practices and opportunities for professional development, some practitioners are highly likely to experience weaker patterns of professional formation (Fuller and Unwin 2004; Unwin et al. 2007; Billett 2008).

In each system of ECEC recontextualisation is likely to be subject to different influences from a macro, meso and micro level, and also by ‘internal’ configurations within the professional community. *Who* defines the ‘problems of practice’ and *how* they are defined are key concerns, having considerable influence on *what* is defined as a problem. Influential political figures in England have presented views on what they perceive as the key problems of early childhood practice, including a lack of ‘structured learning’ and an insufficient focus on ‘school readiness’ (Truss 2013; DfE 2011). These may not accord with the views of those working in the field and the views of practitioners (i.e. TACTYC 2013), but these definitions have implications for the constitution of professional formation. Defining and representing the key problematics or ‘common problems’ (Vrinioti 2013) of practice, and ensuring these have influence on structures of professional formation, requires rigorous yet inclusive processes within the professional community that rely on research carried out both in practice, and at a distance from it. Indeed, as implied above, research carried out ‘in practice’ relies on the existence of a socio-epistemic bedrock of relations within the professional community to establish the validity and ‘trustworthiness’ of the inquiry (Lincoln

and Guba 1985). Forms of knowledge production a little removed from practice are crucial for the maintenance and iteration of the knowledge base, and for bringing insight to practice from other disciplines, providing of course there is minimal governmental prescription. This could be sustained by seeking to involve the whole professional community in the definition of ‘problems’ qualitatively and working together to ‘make *good* sense’ of practice. However a qualitative process of knowledge validation requires an acceptance of the ‘differentiated’ nature of knowledge (Young and Muller 2010) – that some knowledge is more useful and more true than others. Therefore rather than saying we ‘don’t know what to teach’, or that those ‘distant’ from practice (either in time or location) are unable to provide useful knowledge – the professional community can instead redouble efforts to re-examine, reframe and recontextualise past and current research for its current relevance.

A Knowledge based professionalism – concluding remarks

While there is no doubt that ‘ground-up’ (Dalli 2008) or agentic approaches to professionalism are important for the further development of early childhood professionalism, the argument presented here suggests that they are not sufficient to secure the conditions needed for greater recognition and shared conceptions of that professionalism. The discussion here has focused primarily on the interdependent factors of the meso-level organisation of the professional community and its social relations, and the development of a coherent professional knowledge base, as these are seen as important not only for the maintenance of jurisdiction, but also for improvements in the quality of early childhood practice. In turn, when early childhood professionals are perceived as knowledgeable and well-organised that is likely to further enhance control over the jurisdiction of work and persuade other professionals and government of the credibility of practitioners. In order to bring this about, forms of agency are undoubtedly required, but these are perhaps primarily of a ‘collective’ rather than an ‘individual’ nature, building shared conceptions of knowledge and professionalism.

The argument above also suggests that models of professionalism may reflect the types of ECEC systems in which they exist. While collective agency may be able to advance particular models of professional knowledge and organisation, professionalising trajectories may be hindered, or helped, by existing systemic structures and policy intentions. Integrated systems of ECEC may offer more immediate opportunities for the development of shared conceptions of knowledge, while split systems may lead to fragmentation but also greater

specialisation. Thus a coherent body of knowledge and professional organisation for the early childhood profession in an integrated system may be contrasted with the potential for multiple bodies of knowledge, and professional communities, associated with different early childhood specialisations which may reflect different ages, stages, or types of activity. Here the OECD (2006) delineation of early childhood professional profiles offers a possible starting point. This degree of specialisation may have advantages in terms of recognition of the diversity of early childhood practice, but may also be detrimental for the advancement of the professional field as a whole.

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