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Untangling the knots – [k]not easy: professional identity in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector

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Untangling the knots – [k]not easy: professional identity in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector

Abstract

Those working in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector have struggled for professional recognition and status. While professional identity, or lack of it, is associated with a multiplicity of factors, this paper explores the interplay of gender, knowledge and skills, qualifications, integrated systems and vested interests. It compares the identity of teachers with that of early childhood educators, and considers how ECCE can be elevated to the same level as teaching. It also critiques recent policy initiatives such as the introduction of a minimum training requirement for those working in the sector, and the impending involvement of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the inspection of settings participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme. Finally, this paper calls for reform of the ECCE sector including consideration of pay parity with teachers.

Introduction

There is considerable social, political and media focus on Early Childhood Care and Education¹ (ECCE) worldwide - its cost, quality and availability, and policies directed towards enabling parents to balance employment and caring responsibilities have become a core issue for policy makers around the world (Brennan and Adamson, 2015). Alongside the access, cost and availability discourse, a parallel discourse associated with early intervention prevails, where ECCE is perceived as laying the foundations for lifelong learning (Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2010); eliminating child poverty (Hayes, 2008); and fostering social inclusion in contexts of increasing diversity (Bennett, 2012). While discourses of cost, access, availability and intervention are legitimate, and draw attention to the work and the role of ECCE educators², a third discourse that is concerned with who, and what constitutes an early childhood professional abounds. Urban (2008, p. 135) notes that as governments set “ambitious policy goals” for developing ECCE systems, there is an increasing focus upon professionalising the early childhood workforce.

Educators worldwide struggle for professional recognition and status, and although the movement towards professionalism has resulted in the amelioration of professional qualifications and enhanced professional attitudes, behaviours and skills, there has not been a

¹ For the purposes of this paper, ECCE is used in relation to all services catering for children from birth to six years of age prior to starting school.

² The term educator is used to denote those who work with children aged from birth to six years of age outside of the formal education system.

corresponding increase in professional status, recognition or compensation (Moloney and Pope, 2013; Boyd, 2013). Indeed, it is thought that educators remain among the most poorly remunerated of all professional groups (Herzenberg et al., 2005; Boyd, 2013; Moloney, 2014). Although educator status, or lack of it, is associated with a multiplicity of factors, this paper explores the interplay of gender, knowledge and skills, qualifications, integrated systems and vested interests.

The complexity of professional identity

Irrespective of the discipline, there is no universal definition of professional identity, it is an elusive concept, and in relation to ECCE, terms such as professionalism (educator behaviours and attitudes), professionalization (the process of becoming a profession) and professional identity (status, privilege and recognition) are used interchangeably (Madden, 2012).

In exploring professional identity, we must ask what our individual understandings are. Is it about how members of a profession “define themselves to themselves and others” (Lasky 2005, p. 900), or is it, as suggested by Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2011, p. 11) “a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn and make sense of practise”? What about the influential capacity of the professional in terms of his/her attitude and behaviour towards their profession (Boyt et al., 2001, p. 32), or is professional identity the process of envisioning oneself as a professional? (Breen, 2014). Is professional identity about qualifications and training, expert knowledge and practise in the field? Is it about status and remuneration, or all of these things? Clearly, all these aspects matter. Thus, professional identity is located at the intersection of both the personal and the professional (Brock, 2012) and embedded in the discourse of values and principles (Urban, 2008; Greene, 2010; Brock, 2012); personal qualities, ideology and relationships (Dalli, 2008); professional knowledge and expertise (Dalli, 2008; Brock, 2012; Duignan, 2012); training and qualifications (Lyons, 2011; Moloney and Pope, 2013; Breen, 2014); status (Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013); and rewards (Brock, 2012; Boyd, 2013).

Professional identity is “like a ball of knotted string” (Friedman, 2007, p. 126) that requires certain knots “to be opened and untangled” (Brock, 2012, p. 29). There are countless knots on the ECCE landscape, including the perception that it is a practical matter related to women and children (Lobman and Ryan, 2007; Duignan, 2012) for which little, if any, training is required (Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013).

The first knot: Gendered assumptions

The hyper-feminine composition of the ECCE workforce (Osgood, 2010) compounds professional identity with McGillivray (2008, p. 252) noting that “few if any, ‘professionalised’ feminized occupations (nursing, social work, and teaching) suffer from ambiguity due to their job title to the same extent as... [Educators]”. Labels such as ‘childcare’ and ‘childcare worker’ denote simplistic connotations (Woodrow, 2007; Moloney, 2010) with an assumption that the job content and tasks of the educator “can be performed by anybody, or more particularly, by any woman” (Lyons, 2011, p. 126). Interestingly, the predominantly female composition of the teaching profession, where men comprise less than one third of teachers (European Commission, 2015), does not appear to obstruct teacher professional identity; and in Ireland, teaching is perceived as an attractive career choice that carries strong social prestige, and is held in high esteem (DES, 2012; Hyland, 2012).

The struggle for identity within caring occupations, including ECCE, is precisely because of their association with care work (Bolton and Muzzio, 2008) which requires innate caring qualities that may not be associated with professional knowledge and expertise. Caring *per se* is devalued because it is symbolically associated with women and mothering. This association affects people’s sense of how much the job is worth and how much workers should be paid (England et al., 2002), thus “reinforce[ing] perceptions that working with young children is women’s work and not necessarily done by trained and qualified [educators]” (McGillivray, 2008, p. 245).

However, educators are considered central to achieving the ambitious policy goals of increasing the quality and quantity of ECCE provision which, as mentioned, are core issues for policy makers worldwide. Their work is increasingly in the spotlight, and care and education, which was once common social practice, have now become specialised tasks for educators (Urban, 2008) requiring considerable knowledge and skill.

The second knot: Knowledge and skills

Working with children in an ECCE setting is a ‘professional role’ with guidelines for practice expressed within *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) and *Siolta: the National Quality Framework* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2015, p.4). *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) places a considerable focus upon ‘nurturing pedagogy’ which emphasises children’s feelings and dispositions (Hayes, 2007). The educator encourages playful interactions and behaviours,

explorations, conversations, and collaborative learning, while also observing, reflecting upon and interpreting children's words and actions (NCCA, 2009). An educator's ability to interact with young children in a developmentally appropriate manner requires reciprocity, initiation and joint involvement episodes, and is a "highly specialised and skilful task" (Dinneen, 2009, p.172).

In meeting the *Siolta/Aistear Practice Guidelines* (NCCA, 2015), educators are required to achieve core knowledge and skills including Child Development 0-6 years, Early Learning Theory and Practice, Child Health and Welfare 0 – 6 years (DCYA, 2015), as well as knowledge of sociology, philosophy and neuroscience (Duignan, 2012). In a national study of educators' perceptions of their professionalism in New Zealand, Dalli (2008) found the need for a distinct pedagogical style and values; specialist knowledge, qualifications, professional development and reflective practice. In a smaller study in England, Brock (2012) identified the need for educators to acquire a body of knowledge including developmental psychology, child development, and knowledge about curriculum and pedagogy.

However, the relational, and interpersonal aspects of ECCE are difficult to quantify or link to a specialised knowledge base. Rather, the caring attributes that are critical to working with young children, risk being associated with altruism and vocation by society, for which little knowledge and reward is required. This is not surprising in a context where there is no consensus about the most appropriate qualification or qualification level required to work in ECCE. Nonetheless, there are perceptible changes in relation to the need for educators to undertake professional training, and it is recommended that at least 60% of the workforce should be trained to degree level (Urban et al., 2011).

The third knot: Qualifications and training

Teachers are considered of primary importance in learning at school, and the need to optimise their contribution has been endorsed at European level as an educational priority (European Commission, 2015, p.9). Both the European Commission and the Council of the European Union stress the need to improve teacher education, continuing professional development, and the attractiveness of the teaching profession (European Commission, 2015). The Teaching Council (2011, p.6) which regulates the professional practice of teachers in Ireland and oversees teacher education programmes, views education as a 'public good' and calls upon the State "to guarantee an adequate supply of highly qualified teachers...". This is ensured through initial teacher education (ITE) that requires all teachers to undertake a four

year Bachelor of Education. ITE programmes attract recruits from the top 15% of academic achievers in the Leaving Certificate examination (Hyland, 2012) whose academic standard “is among the highest, if not the highest in the world” (DES, 2012, p.19).

Quite a different picture emerges in relation to ECCE. Notwithstanding an acknowledgement by the DES (2011, p.27) that the role of the educator “is no less critical [than that of a primary school teacher] to ensuring positive experiences for and outcomes for children’s learning and development”, and that qualifications are “a central contributing factor in the achievement of high quality early years provision and experiences for children” (DCYA, 2015, p.1), the State is only now introducing a mandatory training requirement for educators. Following an exposé of poor practice in a number of ECCE settings in 2013, a National Early Years Quality Agenda was introduced, to improve the quality of provision, including the introduction of a mandatory qualification for educators³ from September, 2016 (DCYA, 2015). Higher qualifications⁴ are required of those working directly with children in the *ECCE scheme*⁵ (2010) and a higher premium is paid to settings employing degree qualified educators. Currently 86.8% of educators hold a qualification equal to or higher than NFQ Level 5 (Pobal, 2015) while only 12.5% are degree qualified educators (Pobal, 2014). Given that almost 87% of the workforce currently hold a basic minimum qualification, the recent allocation of an additional €500,000 through the Learner Fund⁶ to enable educators attain a Level 5 qualification is disturbing, and is possibly the clearest indication yet, that the State does not intend to address the status of the ECCE workforce.

There are seventeen Higher Education Institutes offering undergraduate training in ECCE - Table 1 highlights the disparity in CAO⁷ (Central Statistics Office) points for entry to ITE and undergraduate degree programmes in ECCE⁸.

³ From September, 2016 all educators working in ECCE must hold a nationally accredited Major Award in Childcare/Early Childhood Education at Level 5 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

⁴ All pre-school leaders delivering the scheme must hold a nationally accredited Major Award in Childcare/Early Childhood Education at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

⁵ The ECCE Scheme was introduced in 2010 to provide access to a free pre-school year of 15 hours per week to children in the year before they start school

⁶ The Learner Fund, established in 2013 offers existing educators a subsidy towards the cost of early years courses at level 5 and 6. The current allocation of €500,000 is focussed solely upon Level 5

⁷ The CAO processes applications for undergraduate courses in Higher Education Institutions. Decisions on admissions to undergraduate courses are made by the HEIs who instruct CAO to make offers to successful candidates

⁸ Table 1 provides entry requirements from a sample of Higher Education Institutes offering degree level training in ECCE

Table 1 CAO points for entry to ITE and ECCE programmes 2014 and 2015

Points requirements for entry to Initial Teacher Education		
Institution	Points 2014	Points 2015
Coláiste Mhuire, Marino	460	465
St Patrick's College, Drumcondra	465	470
Froebel College of Education	510	500
Mary Immaculate College	465	470
Church of Ireland College	400	385
Points requirements for entry to BA. ECCE Level 8		
Institution	Points 2014	Points 2015
IT Blanchardstown	300	285
IT Carlow	265	260
Dublin IT	420	380
IT Tralee	300	290
Mary Immaculate College	360	360
St Patrick's College Drumcondra ⁹	-	380
University College Cork	380	390

Source: Qualifax.ie

The discrepancy in entry level alone sets teaching apart from ECCE, and signifies the importance attached to it by the State.

Professional identity is further undermined by salaries. While the starting salary of a newly qualified teacher is €30,702 (DES, 2013), educators, irrespective of qualifications, earn little more than minimum wage (Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013; Early Childhood Ireland [ECI], 2015) and degree qualified educators do not enjoy the status and privilege that accompanies teaching (Moloney and Pope, 2013). The fact that there is no correlation between educational attainment, professional status, and compensation, poses a significant threat to the professionalisation of the sector, as many educators feel undervalued and underappreciated, with increasing numbers leaving in search of better paid work elsewhere (Moloney and Pope, 2013; ECI, 2015). Additionally, some degree qualified educators

⁹ St Patrick's College offered a Bachelors in Early Childhood Education for the first time in September, 2015

subsequently enrol in postgraduate ITE programmes (Hyland, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013) creating an ongoing skills-gap and de-professionalising the ECCE sector (Quinn, 2015).

The fourth knot: Integrated systems

It is evident that teaching is a highly regarded and rewarding career, leading to consideration of how the ECCE sector can be elevated to a comparable level? Conceptually, the integration of ECCE within the education system, may result in improved status and reward for educators. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) applies equally to ECCE and the infant classes of primary school, and embodies a shared vision for children, and an understanding of how they learn in early childhood. It can, therefore, be viewed as a positive step towards creating a continuum of education from birth to six years. It is perplexing to note the diversity in supports for infant teachers and educators in their use of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Thus, while the NCCA has developed a network of *Aistear* tutors to support infant teachers (DCYA/DES, 2011), similar support has not been available to educators. The Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan, TD, states that “unlike the school sector, there is no funding stream for Continuing Professional Development for [Educators]” (Oireachtas Debates, 2015). Consequently, with the exception of a small number of settings that avail of support through Better Start (2014), an on-site mentoring service, educators are advised to access the *Siolta/Aistear Practice Puide* (NCCA, 2015) via the NCCA website to determine how these frameworks can be applied in practise (NCCA, 2015). This twin track approach to support again sets teaching apart, and sends a clear message about its importance.

Since the introduction of the ECCE scheme, the State has assumed greater responsibility for ECCE; the impending DES inspections which will focus upon the nature, range and appropriateness of the educational experiences of children participating in the scheme (DES, 2015) signifies closer alignment between ECCE and the education system. Although there are obvious benefits to the DES involvement, such as support and advice for educators, and affirmation of good practice (DES, 2015), there is no indications that the State will countenance the notion of pay parity with teachers. There are fears also that the sector may become defined solely by the *ECCE scheme* (Wolfe et al., 2013). It appears to elevate the work and status of educators in the scheme (albeit they continue to earn minimum wage), while further marginalising those who are perceived as simply caring for children under three years of age, for which lesser qualifications are required (Moloney, in press). Ultimately, the

proposed DES inspections will reinforce the longstanding care/education divide, and may even result in a further new split between children in the birth to three age cohort, and children aged three to six years (Ibid.).

Never the less integration has resulted in enhanced status and reward in other countries. New Zealand for example, has been recognised as a leader in relation to integrating care and education under a single Ministry, as well as policies and funding schemes directed towards qualification levels and pay equity (Dalli, 2008; Mitchell, 2012). Its strategy, *Pathways to the Future* (2002), sought to establish a 100% teacher-led ECCE profession by 2012. This objective was supported by considerably increased funding to align pay rates for university qualified educators to that of teachers, with rates of remuneration increasing almost fourfold (Mitchell, 2012). Primarily due to economic constraints, the ambitious targets set out in the strategy have since been reduced to 80% for educators working with children over 2 years of age, and 50% for the under two age group (Dalli, 2010). Clearly however, integrated governance can result in considerable change at conceptual, structural and practise level. Pay parity with teachers in New Zealand has made working in ECCE a more attractive option. In spite of considerable revisions to the ambitious targets within *Pathways to the Future*, the sector is perceived as professional, and salaries and working conditions reflect this.

The fifth knot: Vested interests

There are suggestions that vested interest groups are a factor in maintaining poor remuneration levels in ECCE. According to Bretherton (2010), one such group is employers. He suggests that because the sector relies heavily upon educators with minimum qualifications, employers are supported to conform to mandated qualification requirements, enabling them to source cheap labour, rather than employing university trained employees. Conversely, Moloney and Pettersen (2015) found that while employers in Ireland value training and qualifications, their inability to compensate educators appropriately is directly related to underinvestment by government, effectively placing an inordinate burden on employers to bridge the gap between investment and the cost of providing an ECCE service.

Doubtless, governments have vested interests as evidenced through the reduction in the percentage of university qualified educators in New Zealand as a result of economic constraints. A further example of government vested interests at work is apparent in the recently published Inter-Departmental Group [IDG] report *Future Investment in Childcare in*

Ireland (IDG, 2015). While recognising that higher qualification levels could have a very positive effect on child outcomes, the report simultaneously expresses concern that the “rapid introduction of higher qualifications...is likely to increase cost, tighten supply and reduce accessibility and affordability for many parents” (IDG, 2015, p.48). Ultimately the focus is upon supporting economic growth and prosperity by enabling parents to balance employment and caring responsibilities, rather than advancing the status of the sector, which it calls upon to address issues of quality, access and intervention.

Irrespective of the social, economic, labour market and community responsibilities thrust upon workers, Morgan (2005) asserts that because of funding, cost and wage implications, it is not in the interests of governments, families or employers to advance the status of educators or their work. Consequently, vested interests stand in the way of achieving professional status.

Conclusion

As discussed, teaching is held in high regard, and teacher salaries and conditions of employment reflect this. Educators do not enjoy the status and privilege that accompanies teaching, and the differences between teachers and educators begins with qualification requirements. In spite of lofty rhetoric at policy level about the importance of ECCE, educators have not been required to attain the same qualification levels as teachers. Even when potential educators opt to undertake university qualifications, the CAO points’ differential for entry to teacher education and ECCE programmes is stark, and sends a clear message about the importance of teaching.

Recent policy initiatives have altered the structural landscape of ECCE, including the *ECCE scheme* (REF?), the introduction of a mandatory training requirement, the establishment of Better Start, and the introduction of DES inspections. Although positive, these developments do not go far enough in terms of redressing the issues identified in this paper relating to the professional identity of educators.

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) has the potential to be a unifying mechanism, yet infant teachers and educators are part of a split workforce in terms of governance, funding and support. Hence infant teachers continue to enjoy the privilege and status that accompanies their role, while educators have become fractured between those working with children in the *ECCE scheme* (REF?) and those working with children under three years. In relation to the latter, their role

has clearly been reduced to that of carer for which minimal qualifications are required. In addition to a higher qualification requirement for educators in the *ECCE scheme* (REF?), their practise will be inspected by the DES, who will not inspect services for the under-threes. TUSLA: the Child and Family Agency will continue to inspect provision for children under three years of age (REF?).

DES involvement in inspections will undoubtedly create a conceptual alignment which may elevate the status of educators in the *ECCE scheme*, but as indicated, there is no indication that it will result in pay parity with teachers. Of course such a move would require educators to hold a university degree, which would have considerable funding implications for the State, and/or employers. What we have is partial integration, whereby the State recognises the importance of preparing children for school with which the *ECCE scheme* (REF?) has become synonymous. It is therefore concerned with certifying the quality of such provision. However, a critical factor has been overlooked– education in its broadest sense as espoused in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) which affords equal importance to care and education in a child’s learning and developmental trajectory. In keeping with this fundamental premise, all educators must be valued for their contribution to childrens’ education. Difficult decisions are necessary in order to reform the sector in Ireland, including setting targets for the number of degree qualified educators working in the sector and examining and funding pay parity with teachers.

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