

Beyond critique ⇔ Towards Creativity: Revisiting ‘Professionalism’ in Early Childhood Education

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As a profession, contemporary Early Childhood Education has for a long time been subject to ongoing regulation, standardisation, requirements for predefined educational programmes, and increased credentialization. These developments have been accompanied by an intense commercialization of early childhood pedagogy, alongside international trends for evidence-based research which narrowly shapes professionalism through universal and standardised criteria. Accordingly, scholars have drawn attention to how neoliberal technologies have forced striated working conditions, and go on to critique the persistence of normative criteria for early childhood education and care regardless of local geopolitical contexts (Bartholdsson, 2021; Fenech & King, 2022; Hordern, 2014; Kamenarac, 2023; Lagos-Serrano, 2024; Mooney Simmi & Murphy, 2023; Nganga et.al., 2020; Osgood, 2004; 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2012; Sandvik, 2014; Togsverd, 2015). Professionalism in early childhood has been the focus of much contestation and debate in recent history (reaching as far back as 2006 with a Special Issue of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Guest Edited by Jayne Osgood; and picked up again in this *journal in 2010* by Guest Editor, Mathias Urban). Despite this longstanding commitment to deconstruction and critique, the persistence of regulation and standardisation continues unabated.

Perhaps, as Latour (2004) argued, ‘critique has run out of steam’. If that is the case, as a sector we need to ask - What now? - What next? Perhaps now is the opportune moment to consider what decades of critique have laid the foundations for. How do we move on from critiquing? Can professionalism be thought of in other ways, with other epistemological goals? How might professionalism be rethought? What might be the implications of such reconceptualisations? What alternative stories of professionalism are to be told?

From sociological perspectives concepts such as autonomy, power, and discretion are important when considering what constitutes professionalism. Although studies of professions are often grounded in sociological frameworks, from a philosophical orientation the ontological concern regarding understandings of the practitioner as professional tends to be entrenched within the Humanist tradition. Concepts such as autonomy, professional

judgement and discretion rest upon ideas of an enlightened and individualised Subject. However, such Euro-Western Humanist ways of thinking the subject and subjectivity are increasingly called to account. Life in the Anthropocene - fraught with implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Artificial Intelligence, biotechnology and robotics, and the prospect of the extinction of entire species due to capitalism and colonialism (Braidotti, 2019; Jackson, 2020; Manning, 2016; Stengers, 2018) - demands a move away from critique alone towards more generative approaches that enable the complexities of our time to be grappled with. Braidotti (2019, p.108) urges an ontological shift built on a subject recognized as “being-in this-together”.

A growing body of scholars in Early Childhood Education (e.g. Andersen, 2015; Fairchild, 2017; Osgood & Guigni, 2015; Osgood 2019, 2022; Reinertsen, 2017; Somerville, 2014; Westgaard Bjelkerud, 2022) are creatively and affirmatively engaging in reconceptualisations of professionalism in ECE, broadening its terms through material turns, affective turns, and corporeal turns. By taking on a wide range of ontological and epistemological approaches such work addresses questions of what professionalism might be/come when embarking on adventurous and caring ways of revisiting professionalism in nurseries, kindergartens and early childhood more generally.

This Special Issue takes an unapologetically political approach to professionalism, affirming it as an ecology of practices that consists of both major and minor ethics. The political and philosophical terrain traversed prompts us to think about professionalism in ways that emphasize and evolve from lines of thought other than those rooted in Western Enlightenment philosophy. If indeed, Western philosophy and Modernist sedimentations and deposits are part of the problem (Povinelli, 2021), we are left with narrow figurations of professionalism, that require a search elsewhere to ask: *What else? What if?* Questions related to, and representations of, the influence of neo-liberal governance technologies in early childhood professionalism are insufficient. There is now an urgent need to articulate professionalism from the places that have been omitted and overlooked through the framings and figurations evoked by capitalist and colonialist regimes. In this regard, this Special Issue enacts the call from Stengers and Despret (2014) to embark upon the adventurous and affirmative critiques of unfaithfulness, in order to make a fuss - or rather to propose and produce something else.

By way of introducing the contents of this Special Issue and the emergent themes threaded throughout, we offer a stitching together of the fibres that frayed as we worked our way

through a bundle of bold and courageous articles, which gesture that *another professionalism is possible* (Stengers, 2018):

A Woven Tale of Making a Fuss
Imagining professionalism-otherwise
Unsettles colonialist grammars
foregrounding artful, divergent workings
Attuned to affective methods
Of re-learning through sensing
Yielding to what else matters
On risky adventures of becoming
Otherwise-professionals
Wondering
Where the wild teachers are
Witchy activists, collectively toiling
With the trouble that bubbles
Upon relations, relationalities, relatings
To embodied practices of care
communities, collectivities, co-created through
Dynamic processes of possibility
Reclamation, resistance, imagination, transformation
Another fold
Complex, dim, obscure,
Microscopic mattering
Towards re-imagining
Attunements to planetary futures
Sensing urgency for something else
... ..
Professionalism-otherwise

Fig 1. Poem: A Woven Tale

As our poem (fig.1) gestures, an invitation to the *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* community to reimagine professionalism in ECE incited a wild and passionate response. The articles that make up this Special Issue approach the phenomenon of professionalism through varied frameworks and lenses but what surfaces when engaging with this body of work is an ecology of affects that stir the reader from places of complacency or comfort. As this corpus of work makes visible, whilst professionalism remains deeply problematic and paradoxical, through critically creative experimentation we learn that it can also be a place of solidarity, affirmation and possibility. We invite the reader to engage with the contents of this Special Issue in transversal ways, reading texts alongside or through each other. Here we offer a brief overview of the philosophical, methodological and political ambitions of each paper in turn which provides a distillation of the richness that this collection offers.

The collection begins with a paper from Nidhi Menon and Lisa Johnston titled: *Being In This Together: improvising imaginaries of professionalism through care collectives*. Riffing off Braidotti's (2019) urge for an ontological shift that creates space for 'being-in-this-together' the article offers a powerful, activist reimagining of professionalism as it materialises through feminist, community-based collective action. In Ontario, Canada (like so many other geopolitical contexts) contemporary ECE is framed by neoliberal, patriarchal and colonial logics that work to oppress and suffocate other imaginaries and enactments of professionalism. Through a series of lively narrative accounts, the paper seeks to repoliticize and revalue early childhood educators' work. The stories from members of activist communities, that are infused with feminist ethics of care and collective leadership, are bursting with refusal and hope. Together the stories amass to offer an alternative vision of professionalism - one grounded in relationality, emotion, and community-based activism. Sharing narratives from members of the collective provides vital tracings of the ways these groups create spaces for professionalism to be/come through co-creation and privileging embodied, affective, and ethical practices. By making visible how moving beyond critique is possible through collective activist storytelling, the authors illustrate that professionalism is transformed from surveillance and regulation to an on-going dynamic, relational process of world-making that values collective becoming and affirms political and pedagogical possibilities of care. Through this reconfiguration, the authors assert the need for a growing movement to reclaim professionalism as a site of resistance, imagination, and transformation.

The next article proposes an artful professionalism. Ruth Churchill Dower and Jo Albin-Clark in *Prescribings for Artful Professionalisms in Early Childhood Education* playfully attend to the sensuous and embodied becomings of early childhood education professionalism. In their commitment to foreground artful and divergent ways of working, affective sensing practices are introduced as a means to invite early educators to experiment with more-than-human pedagogies. Contemporary ECE practice rests upon a logic of linear, forward, progress that seeks to normalise and flatten difference, with profound implications for both child and educator. Inspired by Erin Manning's philosophising of the 'artful' and 'diversity in diversity', the authors propose 'artful professionalisms' as a mode of being that refuses the logics of normalisation and progress. The article goes on to illustrate how an artful approach in ECE invites affective attunement to difference through young children's alternative ways of knowing which in turn, animates expansive possibilities to reconfigure what counts as professionalism. Through research-creation, Churchill Dower and Albin-Clark artfully engage with images of an everyday encounter in ECE which enabled slowing down to attune to sensuous moments with minor resonances. Activating sensing practices through their research-creation project made visible frustrations, joys and curiosities that hold potential to learn from the potential in children's worldings beyond words. The authors conclude by proposing a professionalism grounded in participation, speculation, and embodied experimentation. They stress that becoming an artful, divergent professional is generative in the ways that it invites sensitivity towards emergent possibilities that yield to what else matters. This mode of be/coming professional in ECE makes particular demands of the educator - to surrender to uncertainty and emergence. Whilst artful professionalism might at first appear to be a risky mode of professionalism, it is wild and adventurous and as such comfortably aligns with the messy and multi-sensory worlds of early childhood.

Pursuing the thread of wildness in ECE further, Katrin Macha and Andrew Gibbons take the reader on a road trip with Maurice Sendak. In *Where the wild teachers are: The early childhood professional and the wild effects of professionalism* the authors invite us to explore professionalism through the lens of wildness as a mode of refusal to neoliberal demands for standardisation, normalisation and docility. Weaving vignettes from a road trip across Aotearoa New Zealand the article theorises professionalism as a phenomenon that persistently travels, surfaces, agitates and threads its way into the most unlikely of everyday encounters. Drawing on their lived experiences of working alongside ECE teachers, Macha and Gibbons share their frustrations, ambivalences, hopes and fears for the field and urge a refusal of being

tamed into teaching. The paper invites readers to make space for wildness and celebrate its generative potential for professionalism to become something altogether more unruly, affectively charged, and intuitive.

Seongryeong Yu and Jennessa Libby-Reynolds offer a re-authoring of professionalism through practices of mapping classrooms with logics of care, creative resistance and relational attunement. There are strong resonances with the preceding articles where early childhood teachers are reframed through philosophically informed, creative research practices that offer possibilities for other imaginaries. The article reinforces the proposition that ECE is deserving of a more capacious professionalism than that which is currently insisted upon through capitalist, neoliberal, policy machinations. *Becoming-with Inclusivity in Early Childhood Education Professionalism through Multimodal Visualization of Classrooms* explores how pre-service teachers conceptualize and materialize inclusivity through creative practices. Putting to work posthumanist philosophies the study investigates visions for inclusive professionalism through classroom mapping, reflective journalling, and hearing the stories of a group of pre-service teachers in the United States. Inclusivity was found to be more than a policy objective or curriculum goal, rather the authors argue that it can be expansively re-imagined through material, affective, and spatial engagements. Through creative practices of mapping classrooms, pre-service ECE teachers became more acutely attuned to sensory diversity, the need for emotional responsiveness, and the imperative to contemplate how to grapple with cultural representation in the classroom. The materialisation of alternative imaginaries in ECE revealed professionalism to be embodied practices of care that have the potential to agitate creative resistance through relational attunement. Post-foundational research with pre-service teachers created space for a collective dismantling of professionalism as a fixed set of competencies that can be assessed and measured. Rather, the authors illustrate the emergence of professionalism as an ongoing negotiation between structure and imagination.

Next, Agnes Westgaard Bjelkerud writes from the Norwegian context to argue that *What is needed is a cryptographer: baroque conceptualisations of professionalism*. The article asserts that as the characteristics and attributes of being a professional have tightened and streamlined over time there has been an emergence of other characters. The compulsion to perform professionalism in certain ways creates a place from which resistance and opposition assert themselves, in sometimes unlikely ways. In collaboration with kindergarten teachers,

Westgaard Bjelkerud explores professionalism through empirical-philosophical experiments to explore both complexity and contradiction. Drawing upon Deleuzian philosophy, most notably ‘the fold’, the article dramatizes the concept of professionalism to offer creative conceptual innovation intended to loosen the rigidity and habitual framing that serves to unhelpfully fix professionalism. By putting to work the baroque fold the article suggests that a move away from a landscape which relates professionalism to simplicity and certainty, standardisation and knowability, towards its inherent complexity is urgently needed. Dismantling and playing with the concept of professionalism reveals forces of resistance that are not always obvious or discernible but that serve to open new territories for imagining professionalism-otherwise.

In *Following the Witch’s Flight: Reimagining Professionalism in Early Childhood Literacy Education* Bessie Dernikos and Jaye Johnson Thiel introduce another figuration of the ECE professional - the witch. The article is situated in the USA amidst censorship debates and current crises in literacy that position early childhood educators under acute pressure to develop and demonstrate professional dispositions linked to content knowledge, and narrowly prescribed values and ethics. The authors think-with the figuration of the witch as a method to highlight the colonial production of professionalism. It is by embracing the ‘witchy’ nature of literacy in ECE that the article arrives at a reconceptualisation that questions how thinking with the post↔feminist↔witch might unsettle colonialist grammars and so resignify ECE professionalism. Acknowledging that witch/witchcraft is bound up in colonialist histories the authors reclaim its potential to enable reimagined professional ECE communities that refuse colonial violence and the post-enlightenment-subject of Man.

Yanina Carrizo’s article: *Microscopic Matters and Multispecies Pedagogies: Re-creating Professionalism in Early Childhood Education* contributes to the re-conceptualisation of professionalism by recognising the pedagogical significance of multispecies, material and sensory entanglements. The author extends an invitation to ECE educators to move beyond an exclusive concern with human agency towards co-constructed knowledge and experience with multiple others. The article shares insights from research with young children in Australia, where engaging with the microscopic matter of dust gestured to ways that child–earth relations can reconfigure understandings of professionalism. Dust is approached as an agentic material entangled with children’s bodies, technologies and ecological systems, revealing connections between professionalism, capitalism, colonialism, pollution and creative ecological microworlds. Mobilising post-foundational concepts to make sense of that which

was agitated through research-with dust generated a series of implications for early childhood pedagogies. The article concludes by proposing heightened, ecologically attuned, professionalisms-to-come, that must be responsive to planetary futures.

Marikaisa Laiti, Riikka Kess and Jaana Juutinen attempt to deepen understandings about the potential for Sámi onto-epistemologies to contribute to a reconceptualisation of teacher professionalism in their article: *Teacher Professionalism in Sámi Early Childhood Education: Working at the Cultural Interfaces*. They propose that Sámi ECE teachers work at cultural interfaces, where multiple expectations, interests, demands and goals are present and where the teacher's task is to weave them together. By working with dimensions of teacher's intercultural competence and investigating how they connect with Indigenous onto-epistemologies reveals moments of coalescence and sometimes collision. Materialising Sámi ECE professionalism involves transferring Sámi traditional knowledge and practices to formal educational settings which in turn holds the potential for Sámi onto-epistemologies to radically alter pedagogical practice. The authors propose that Sámi ECE professionalism involves conscientization as a process of awareness-raising, resistance and change. The paper concludes by exploring the centrality of dialogue as a powerful method to reconceptualise and enact Sámi ECE professionalism.

The issue concludes with a ludic provocation from artist-activists Red Ruby Scarlet and Louise Dorrat. In their colloquia piece titled: *"How did you know how we felt?": All professional development should be a musical!* the reader is invited into a theatrical undoing of the Australian National Quality Framework. The photo essay deliberately pushes at the boundaries of what counts as valid (academic) knowledge by playfully mapping how else professionalism can be imagined when it becomes a performative production shared with audiences made up of ECE teachers. Activating Haraway's SF framework, most notably, speculative fabulation, the authors assert that *The Musical!* re-stories professionalism in ECE by making visible the messy entanglement of politics, philosophy, law, regulation and policy in everyday ECE professional practice.

These glimpses into the articles that constitute this Special Issue provide a sense of the possibilities that become available when we reach beyond critique alone towards creatively reimagining professionalism through a range of epistemological starting places and methodological innovations.

“Being-in-this-together” creates other conditions for “making a fuss” when contemplating how else professionalism might be thought and done. Resistance threads throughout the articles, as they each variously and creatively re-encounter professionalism, there is a discernible move away from the bounded individualised human subject towards collectivities of resistance. Resistance unfolds in myriad ways; as political resistance to predefined prescriptions, but it also manifests itself through ontological perspectives where matter provides resistance to thinking.

Resistance also surfaces as story-telling, the authors in this collection refuse to accept THE story of professionalism (that has been so thoroughly exposed as damaging and disrespectful through decades of critique). The invitation to imagine *professionalism-otherwise* generated a series of tales; stories that reach beyond questioning who writes THE story and for what purpose. Rather the questions become more interesting: What affective forces do stories set in motion? How can we invite new characters into our stories? How can we ‘avoid the linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic’ story (Le Guin, 1986, 153)? Who, what, where and when can be a story teller?

We need other stories! Stories that interrupt the heroic, masculinist, dominant linear tale of early childhood education. We need stories that are planetary in scale and microscopic in focus. We need stories that trouble colonialist grammars. We need stories of wildness and witchcraft - unruly stories of refusal. Stories of care and activism. Stories that unsettle and cause a stammer to our thinking. Stories without endings. Stories that matter. Stories of possibility and hope.

The authors in this Special Issue take us on embodied, affectively charged adventures that propose reimagined professionalisms that are persistently on the move, dynamic, mutating and always in relation. Stories that are shared in this collection offer situated accounts from varied yet specific geopolitical contexts, where the force of atmospheric resonances that are agitated gesture towards a collective narrative of resistance and reclamation. These tales convey a shared sense of frustration, anger and refusal from the field of ECE, but that is not all - the move from critique to creativity has generated multiple hopeful portals and thresholds of possibility.

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