

In pursuit of worldly justice in Early Childhood Education: bringing critique and creation into productive partnership for the public good

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Abstract

This chapter attends to a critical analysis of the ways in which the early childhood education (ECE) workforce in England experiences a series of fundamental social injustices. Through a decade or more of research framed by a concern with social justice the ways in which government policy and therefore public discourse frames the workforce has been addressed. This body of research revealed that the workforce is presented as holding a contradictory position: as both saviour of society *and* shambolic. This troubling construction, which continues to persist, has provided the justification for endless national strategic plans and workforce remodelling projects. The ECE has undergone unprecedented reform for over 20 years and during that time structural injustices (i.e. low status, poor pay and unfavourable working conditions) persist. However, this highly gendered and classed workforce maintains its commitment to the youngest children (their families and local communities), and it is through increased education that this workforce has found creative ways in which to circumvent and rework neoliberal apparatuses (curriculum diktats, inspection regimes and other accountability measures) to ensure that it contributes to the public good through practices of worldly justice.

Introduction

The early childhood workforce represents an interesting conundrum to policy makers, parents and the general public more broadly. Views that are held about the workforce directly relate to the societal value that is placed on very young children. The infamous quote from Aristotle “*Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man*” signals something of the way in which early childhood is understood; as preparation for a later, more significant, more important and more valued stage of life. All the time that early childhood as a life stage is viewed as a precursor to something bigger, and all the time that early childhood is generally underestimated, so too will its workforce. This has been a preoccupation to many researching the field of early childhood, myself included, who want to argue for another conceptualisation of the child and hence argue for the importance of the early childhood workforce to the lives of very young children, and the public good more generally.

The research that I undertook with colleagues at the Institute for Policy Studies in Education between 2002 and 2015 sought to address the ways in which the early childhood workforce in England was subjected to endless policy reform that altered the field in significant and long-lasting ways. Whilst the reforms were framed by claims to want to address an apparent ‘crisis’ by introducing new qualifications and regimes of accountability and inspection; fundamental social injustices experienced by the workforce nevertheless remained (and still remain) unaddressed. The status attached to working with very young children remains low, the early childhood workforce continues to be denigrated (educators report being treated as little more than ‘glorified babysitters’ and ‘bum wipers’ Osgood, 2012; Osgood et al., 2017). None of the reforms during this period meaningfully addressed structural issues associated with the sector such as poor pay, unfavourable working conditions, and a continued lack of parity with schoolteachers (despite increasing qualification levels across the sector). A number of important factors make the continuation of these social injustices possible, namely the gendered nature of the work, the gendered composition of the workforce, and the

fragmented nature of the field as an employment sector. Yet these social injustices were spared the attention of mainstream research in the field. It was through a series of publications that some uncomfortable truths about the workforce were launched into world as a means to open up debate and begin to tackle social injustices experienced by the workforce. Through journal articles (Osgood, 2004; 2006, 2010) and a monograph (Osgood, 2012) I publicised the fact that early childhood is typically work undertaken by women, from working-class backgrounds, the majority of whom are employed in private sector provision with few opportunities to connect with others in the field, or to have a trade union or professional body to defend and advocate for them. Whilst there was an established and growing body of research about the 'feminised' nature of early childhood education (Elfer, 1994; Cameron et al, 1999; Penn & McQuail, 1996) and a lively debate about the need to bring more men into childcare (Owen et al., 1998), there was much less attention to the classed nature of the work and the fact that young, working-class girls were actively being prepared for working-class jobs (i.e. childcare or hairdressing) (see Osgood et al., 2006).

The prevailing research into the early childhood workforce, for many years has tended to be narrowly concerned with the identification of best practice, and measurement of effectiveness (e.g. Sylva et al. 2003) in a quest to pursue an idealised model of ECE in the name of improved standards and better outcomes for children (i.e. school readiness). This preoccupation in ECE research though fails to engage with the workforce as a group of marginalised women striving to keep the child at the centre of their practice, whilst constantly having to withstand endless judgment and critique of their chosen profession. The research undertaken within IPSE sought to address this imbalance and to foreground the importance for research designed to unearth and trouble the endemic social injustices embedded within education policy and workforce reform. It was through consistently placing a critical social justice lens on the ECE workforce that new knowledge and ways of contemplating how ECE makes a difference in the world could be pursued.

The policy context

Early Childhood Education (ECE) services in England have received unprecedented attention, resources and initiatives for over 20 years. The *National Childcare Strategy* (DfE, 1997) marked the beginning of a political preoccupation with the Early Years workforce, which was regarded as a means to secure national economic prosperity (by enabling more parents to work), and as a means to prepare the child of today to become the worthy citizen of tomorrow. Under the New Labour government (1997-2010) educational provision was massively expanded so that ECE became available to all three and four-year-olds. Since 1997 an unparalleled raft of initiatives, developments and policies have been introduced with a shared agenda to expand ECE provision, and to ensure that it is affordable, high quality and accessible. This agenda continued under successive governments as evidenced in a series of five- and ten-year strategies which variously promised 'choice for parents' and 'best starts for children'. This sustained policy reform was framed around an urgent need to heighten 'professionalism' and to 'raise standards'. This reform agenda continues to reshape the field of ECE and alongside the reforms is lively debate, much of which is fuelled by questions surrounding the notion of professionalism that is being promoted and its incongruence with an underfunded, over regulated and demoralised workforce (Elwick et al., 2018).

The workforce then, has been the subject of on-going reform and restructuring, persistently framed by a rhetoric of 'raising quality' which infers that quality is in some sense always lacking. The workforce is persistently framed as deficient and therefore in need of constant reform. Key to raising quality have been expectations for standardisation, transparency and

accountability which are achieved through quality assurance measures, curriculum frameworks and inspection regimes. The need to raise quality through heightened professionalism has been framed in particular ways through dominant discourses and rests upon a socially constructed perennial ‘crisis’ in the early years, which provides justification to tirelessly tinker with the ECE workforce. The twin concepts are inextricably entangled since the logic follows that ‘quality’ ECE relies upon a well-qualified and ‘professional’ workforce, but this linear and rational logic has been extensively troubled (e.g. see Osgood & Giugni, 2016) and the concept and pursuit of quality in ECE remains contested (Jones et al, 2016).

Critical Discourse Analysis of Policy

This policy landscape, whilst seemingly well-intentioned - *Who wouldn't want more and better early years provision? Surely this can only mean that the very youngest of children are finally gaining the recognition they deserve, and therefore the workforce is also recognised as valued and valuable?* - was also deeply troubling, especially when taken from a social justice perspective. In attempts to problematise the seemingly common-sense messages being conveyed in government policy required a project of critical discourse analysis. Through several publications (Osgood 2004, 2006, 2010 and 2012) government policy texts were subjected to Foucauldian inspired, feminist post-structuralist analysis which involved deconstructing, dismantling, problematising and tracing the political intentions underpinning the apparently benign rhetoric about wanting to raise quality and professionalise the workforce in times of perennial crisis. When government policy is understood as both text and discourse it becomes possible to conceive of policy makers seeking a ‘correct reading’ or the promotion of certain discursive truths. Within government policy it is possible to trace the ways in which the workforce has been constructed in contradictory ways: as the salvation of society *and* as shambolic/disordered. Through policy discourses governments orchestrate a particular discursive landscape, one that in the case of ECE, heralds the workforce as central to the economic prosperity of the nation. The nursery worker becomes constructed as the guardian of the nation’s children, and her capacity to protect, nurture and educate them in the *right* ways becomes all-important in the government vision for the nation state:

‘Investment in learning in the 21st century is the equivalent of investment in machinery and technical innovation that was essential in the first industrial revolution. Then it was physical capital, now it is human capital... We know that children who benefit from nursery education – especially from disadvantaged backgrounds – are more likely to succeed in primary school... Our aim is that all children should begin school with a head start in literacy, numeracy and behaviour, ready to learn and make the most of primary education’

[DfEE, 1997: 14-16]

But the nursery worker has more than just the success of the nation state to deliver. She also becomes the means by which (other) women can become full and active citizens through participation in the paid labour market. A great deal rests upon her metaphorical shoulders – she can enable parents to work, thereby ensuring national economic prosperity *and* she can cultivate children to become the right sorts of citizens of the future to safeguard long-term economic well-being. Whilst elevating the ECE workforce to these heady heights government policy also makes clear that ECE is a career for working-class women, to enable middle-class parents to work. So, there is an implicit recognition that a career in ECE is both gendered and classed. Furthermore, the nursery worker is constantly called into question for her lack of skills and professionalism:

‘Our goal must be to make working with children an attractive, high status career, and to develop a *more* skilled, flexible workforce...*improve* the skills and effectiveness of the workforce.’

[my emphasis, DfES, 2003a: 10]

Through these projects of critical deconstruction of policy discourses, I was able to demonstrate that governments carefully craft and cultivate particular ‘truths’ designed to have specific effects. Governments make political ambitions and goals for ECE appear logical, necessary and founded upon sound research evidence. However, I argue that the ways in which the workforce is fabricated through text is both deliberate and intentional. The deficit discourses that can be identified throughout policy texts, and which are then detectable in public discourse, promotes particular discursive truths or persuasive fictions about the (lack of) professionalism amongst nursery workers and the urgent need to tackle the ‘crisis’. These persistent deficit discourses secure the prominence of the workforce in government policy *and* act to divert attention from the structural disadvantages of working in the sector. Working-class women engaged in caring occupations are readily exploited. In order to attain approval in public discourse, working-class women invest in a construction of the ‘caring self’ and in doing so achieve a level of ontological security that would otherwise be denied on account of their classed and gendered identities. Furthermore, the rescue from ‘neglect’ that policy discourses promise can be seductive. For members of the ECE workforce, finding themselves centre stage in policy terms, coupled with the rate and pace of reform to their working practices, diverts attention from the fact that they are conforming to a narrow version of professionalism (one that values technical competence over critical reflection). It was only through excavating and dismantling policy texts through a social justice lens that it became evident how policy discourses work (in subtle yet powerful ways) to confer particular subjectivities upon members of a workforce.

Hearing the Stories of the Subaltern

Alongside critical analysis of policy discourses to expose the ways in which social injustices are normalised and further reinforced through workforce reform agendas, was a need to create opportunities to hear the stories of members of the workforce. Whilst a great deal of research in ECE has been undertaken with leaders and managers there was a noticeable absence of the voices of members of the frontline workforce, endearingly referred to as ‘the girls’ typically found ‘on the floor’ engaged in the day-to-day work of educating, caring and nurturing young children. As a feminist researcher I was inspired to create space to hear the narratives of these marginalised women who were the subject of so much policy attention. In 2003 I began research in three central London nurseries (a Local Authority nursery, a Private Day nursery, and a voluntary sector community nursery). The study aimed to explore nursery worker constructions of ‘being professional/ doing professionalism’ and specifically to examine the ways in which nursery workers negotiate the intersection of a professional identity with their classed, gendered, ‘raced’ identities. I wanted to compare and contrast the ways in which public discourses position nursery workers; and to examine the extent to which practitioners resist and draw upon these public discourses to negotiate their sense of professionalism. The ultimate aim of this feminist, post-structuralist study was to present an alternative account to that offered and sustained through hegemonic public discourses. I privileged certain discursive ‘truths’ over others to achieve the emancipatory goal of the project by offering insights into the marginalised lives of nursery workers.

Through life history interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic observations over an 18 month period, I was able to gather rich, multi-layered accounts of ‘professionalism’ as it manifested in the everyday lives of a group of (principally working-class) women making sense of the endless demands made of them to do their work in more professional, accountable, transparent ways. This research culminated in a book (Osgood, 2012) and numerous presentations to both national and international audiences. It has been adopted to the reading lists of many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes from Oslo to Australia; and from Chile to China reaching many other countries in between. This politically motivated study resonates in other contexts because it talks an alternative ‘truth’ to power. It holds governments to account, and it exposes the ways in which discourses come to have currency, how they circulate and with what effects. It creates a platform from which difficult debates about social injustices as they directly affect an entire workforce can find expression. This is research that is intended to make known the contribution that this workforce makes, the sacrifices made and the means by which it is possible to pursue other ways in which to be professional. The study concluded by identifying a series of counter discourses from within the workforce that promoted the idea of the ‘critically reflexive emotional professional’ over the ‘competent technician’ that is so readily promoted in government policy and related apparatuses.

Professionalism in ECE: critique

My work on professionalism has contributed to complicating debates (Osgood 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008, 2010, 2012) by identifying and troubling how social injustices are created and sustained in the ECE workforce. By unearthing and challenging the significant implications of hegemonic framings of professionalism (based on white, middle-class normative ideas about what professionalism should be) for a principally working-class and female workforce my research holds the potential to realise its political ambitions to unsettle received wisdom and to provide the foundation for a workforce to agitate and resist. As my research attests, for working-class women working in ‘caring’ roles what it takes to do the job well sits outside dominant ideas about what it is to be ‘professional’. I was concerned to investigate how particular professional identities were conferred upon early years workers and what this meant for their sense of self and their ontological securities in undertaking work with young children for the public good. I argued that professional identities are generated from the ways in which human subjects (nursery workers) are positioned and self-position within discourses. Through projects of critique and deconstruction I attended to the ways in which policy discourses, maternal discourses and media discourses work to position the early childhood education workforce in particular ways.

I was at pains to stress the significance of gender and social class and how these intersecting subjectivities make professional identities more or less possible for different members of the early childhood workforce dependent upon social context:

“Professionalism is a performance that is shaped and determined by powerful actors, so that it manifests in myriad ways, and is dependent on context and on recognition by an audience. Therefore, contextual specificity is crucial to understanding professional identities” (Osgood, 2010).

The pursuit of professionalism continues...

I was met with a mixture of trepidation and joy when undertaking research with the same workforce nearly a decade later. What, if anything, might have changed? Supported by team of researchers I was commissioned to undertake a study (Osgood et al., 2017) designed to investigate the extent to which two newly introduced early years qualifications (Early Years

Educator; and Early Years Teacher) had contributed to raising ‘quality’ in the sector. These two new qualifications were introduced as a result of *The Nutbrown Review* (2012). Whilst my intention is not to revisit the problems and tensions that are generated by yet more on-going reviews and reforms to the workforce, what this study into new qualifications revealed was a desperately familiar story. Despite successive policies and on-going workforce reform, the contemporary Early Years workforce, and the related debates about professionalism and quality, look alarmingly similar to those circulating over a decade ago. Whilst there have undoubtedly been significant gains in respect to the qualification levels across the sector, this appears quite fragile when the workforce remains underpaid and undervalued. When additional demands are made of an already overstretched workforce, we see recruitment and retention issues escalate (NDNA, 2016). This more recent research reveals that the workforce continues to suffer a lack of parity with schoolteachers, and is blighted by underfunding, a confused qualification landscape, divisions across the sector, and a persistently gendered workforce that continues to feel marginalised and devalued. The early years workforce continues to be positioned within policy and public discourse as deficient and therefore in need of further reform.

However, in the throes of undertaking this research it became clear that some members of the workforce have a much clearer sense of how they are positioned within government policy discourses, and how related apparatuses – such as inspection regimes, accountability frameworks, curriculum directives – are designed to produce a certain (narrow) form of professionalism (the competent technician raises her neoliberal head once more). There is a critical reflexivity and a deep investment in pushing against normative and standardised ways in which to demonstrate ‘quality’. So, it appears that my earlier attempts to understand professionalism, as produced through discourse, presented important opportunities for resistance and subversion based upon the identification of a counter discourse from within. This counter discourse celebrated that which falls outside of hegemonic framings of professionalism, but which is highly valued and foundational to doing the job well. Nearly a decade ago (Osgood, 2012) I argued for the centrality of humour, emotion, empathy, compassion, intuition, love and commitment as constituting professionalism from within the ECE sector; and I am heartened to see this is still the case in more recent research (Osgood et al., 2017) despite a never-ending drive to impose another (policy-driven) version of professionalism where such traits have no place. I witnessed these qualities: humour, emotion, empathy, compassion, intuition, love and commitment being actively celebrated and mobilised as a resource, as a means to push back against the relentless policy drive to standardise and regulate. It was also encouraging to find that early years staff are readily engaged in research underpinned by a social justice agenda, at one case study nursery included in the study (Osgood et al., 2017) all staff were required to engage in research on their practice: to question received wisdom about how children learn; to question why they practice the way that they do; to deliberate all aspects of their work including how they are framed in policy; and to grapple with the complexities of working with young children, their families and diverse local communities. There was strong evidence of the ‘critically reflexive emotional professional’ I had argued for in 2012. As a long-serving member of the staff team noted:

“In a nutshell we don’t use the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum to guide our practice. We take elements from our practice to satisfy key parts of the EYFS that we need to do. But it is linking it with conversations we have with each other... We’ve always had outstanding Ofsted inspections but that is down to things like the teaching team, the practice, the environment and our social skills. When they (Ofsted) come in,

they can talk to anyone in the teaching team about how we do this or that; and it's all there. They go and talk to the practitioners and they can see they are spending time with the children but it's also being able to communicate and articulate what we're doing, why we're doing it the way that we do, what is important to us; and that it is all there."

[Osgood et al., 2017: 64]

This quote illustrates a degree of professional confidence that is shared amongst the staff team to resist being dictated by curriculum frameworks and inspection regimes. It appears that demands for criticality and reflection embedded in university programmes are directly translating to the mobilisation of a social justice agenda within ECE settings. The ECE educators that pursued undergraduate degrees and Masters degrees (in Osgood et al., 2017) felt that they had developed deeper knowledge and the capacity to critique and problematise all aspects of their work. Many recounted how post graduate study in particular had enabled them to critically assess workforce reform and to understand that the early years as a sector is crafted and refashioned by successive governments to satisfy political imperatives rather than necessarily stemming from a concern for children to flourish from high quality early years experiences. Higher levels of study also instilled greater professional confidence to critically engage with inspection regimes and curriculum frameworks; it can provide a healthy scepticism and the capacity for deep reflection. Participants went on to stress the importance of a firm connection between early years theory and practice. Although combining study and work was demanding, a number of participants stressed that it is only by working directly with children, colleagues and families whilst studying that theory comes to life. Most held the view that the theory-practice divide (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) is lessening in early childhood practice, especially where routinely engaging in research was enculturated into daily practice.

So it appears that the extensive and sustained critique and deconstruction of government policy, media discourses and public perceptions pursued through research framed by a social justice agenda is infiltrating practice; and whilst hegemonic ideas about 'quality' and 'professionalism' remain in place there are nevertheless opportunities that are being seized by the ECE workforce to navigate ways through. This is encouraging and I wonder what happens when another logic is deployed in research and practice? A logic that seeks to reach beyond critique alone and instead makes critique the basis upon which to create other possibilities. This is something that ECE educators are grappling with, as we see in the following quote where an ECE setting is seeking to reconfigure ideas and practices about 'quality':

'We are working on developing a methodology and process through which we can share multiple experiences of people working with a reconfigured understanding of quality. We hope that by sharing practitioners' experiences of working with a view of quality that acknowledges the complexities and entanglements of each individual momentary manifestation of quality, we will help make the discourse and debate about quality more accessible to a broad spectrum of practitioners across multiple settings.'

[The Red House, 2016]

Bringing critique and creation together

A turn to Braidotti's (2013) promise of the intimate connection between critique and creation offers a potentially rich possibility which is increasingly finding expression in early childhood research. There is a growing field of early childhood enquiry that seeks to bring critique and creation together to explore other, more generative, ways in which to consider contentious issues within early childhood education (Osgood & Scarlet, 2016; Osgood, 2019a, 2019b; Osgood & Mohandas, 2020, in press). This 'turn' in early childhood research is framed by feminist new materialist philosophies, theories and methods that invite researchers (and practitioners) to grapple with what this connection offers to imagine sustainable alternatives which go beyond de-construction and open up possibilities for an ethics of (re-)affirmation.

This chapter therefore reaches towards an open-ended but hopeful conclusion as a means to contemplate what feminist new materialist encounters (Strom et al, 2019) with professionalism might produce. Asking a series of questions concerned with creation might take investigations in other, potentially more generative directions than critique alone makes possible. Following key feminist new materialist scholars, I want to ask *what if* (Haraway, 1988, 2008, 2016) and *what else* (Manning, 2016) might it be possible to learn about professionalism in ECE if we resist regarding it an exclusively human matter of concern. What if we move beyond a preoccupation with only discourses and think about professionalism as more than exclusively concerned with human subjectivity? What if professionalism is considered something that is constantly produced and mutating through everyday, mundane habits and practices in early childhood contexts? What else might happen if we were to understand professionalism as emergent and momentary rather than fixed and knowable, or residing in human identities and practices? What if space, place, matter, bodies and affect are brought more squarely into the frame of our inquiries within nurseries? What other stories might be told? What if we embark upon an inquiry into professionalism as materialised figuration (Haraway, 1988)? What else might we come to encounter in our investigations of what counts as professionalism, how it is produced and with what affects? This worldly (Haraway, 2016) approach to ECE stresses the interconnections between human subject, place, space and objects. It is arguably extending notions of 'the public good' as it reaches beyond a humanist understanding of 'public'. Rather, a feminist new materialist approach insists that by taking matter and affect seriously we can recognise our entangled place within the world and how what we do, what we touch, and how we exercise our ethical responsibilities through our everyday encounters can have far reaching consequences (see Osgood & Mohandas, in press).

Telling other stories about professionalism in ECE

Inspired by Haraway (2016:35) it is possible to tell different stories about professionalism than those narrowly formulated in curriculum frameworks, inspection regimes, and normative pedagogical practices. This requires that attention is paid to how stories come about, how they come to hold currency and the affects that they generate. This theoretical framing allows for the material-semiotic-discursive and affective entanglements that unfold within early childhood strategy and research to gain some purchase over more familiar stories about professionalism. I want to consider how else ideas about professionalism in early childhood might be encountered; what might happen if space is made for other stories about professionalism in early childhood. Taking embodied encounters with affect and materiality seriously creates possibilities to think again about professionalism as *produced* within early childhood contexts. It might be that professionalism can be encountered as imperceptible, everyday processes that manifest through small events and moments, that are sensed and felt (rather than as an external concept that is imposed and performed or contested). Taking this

approach to reconfiguring professionalism opens generative possibilities because it becomes something that is sensed as constantly shifting, sliding and mutating. It becomes a slippery concept that is materialised through the everyday. Therefore, something that the ECE workforce can work towards registering and working with rather than a measurable construct imposed via government discourse. Working from this framework opens up the ways in which a given phenomenon, such as professionalism or quality, can be explored (for recent examples see Osgood, 2019a that recounts how the humble Lego brick can teach us about gender in ECE; Osgood 2019b for an investigation into glitter in ECE and what it can teach us about childhood art and our ethical environmental responsibilities in ECE; and Osgood & Mohandas, 2020 to learn how else the pink tower in Montessori classrooms might be encountered and so recognise our worldly connections and responsibilities in ECE).

My most current research stresses that there is a pressing need to change the story, and to this end researchers and practitioners need to narrate and think outside of human-centric accounts of the world. Storytelling can nurture, or invent or discover, or it can ‘be cobbling together ways for living and dying well’ (Haraway, 2016.). This chapter now moves on to highlight where productive fissures between discourses, frameworks and practices exist and therefore allow other stories about professionalism in early childhood to find expression. It requires wonder at the unremarkable, habitual and mundane within early childhood so that professionalism might emerge in unanticipated forms. The task then is to think, to figure and to story professionalism differently. I turn to an example from early childhood practice that endeavours to illustrate how professionalism might be encountered as materialised figuration (Haraway, 1994) through the everyday happenings in early years practice and research.

Strategizing for ‘quality’: Violet’s Story

I walk into the room and it smells of spices. There are always different smells coming from this room as the adults are always adding natural objects to the sensory shelves. Elena once brought in some funny shaped pebbles that she found on her holiday. We spent time looking closely at these pebbles trying to work out where they might have come from and how they got to become that shape. I found out that every pebble has a story. I once saw my friend Katie play with the pebbles adding them to a shopping bag and pretending they were magic beans. Katie had selected the smooth shiny pebbles that felt cold and hard in our hands, I preferred the rougher scratchy pebbles, I liked the way they left marks when I pressed them into my palm, even when I put them down it felt like they were still in my hand. I was a bit worried that Elena’s pebbles might get lost but as Katie put them into her shopping bag I heard Betty remind Katie that when she had finished with the pebbles she must return them to the shelf so that other children can enjoy them. Katie did, but we noticed that one was missing, we all decided to have a look for the missing pebble, but although we searched everywhere we couldn’t find this pebble. We wondered where it might have gone. Elena noticed the missing pebble but she wasn’t upset and said that she would collect more next time she was on holiday’

(Violet’s story 2012:9 quoted in *The Red House*, 2016)

This extract is from the Strategic Plan of a not-for-profit children’s centre in the PVI sector located in the West of England. It captures an attempt to work creatively in the in-between

spaces between policy and practice. The staff at The Red House, frustrated by the hegemonic framings and demands for 'quality' and 'professionalism', identified leakages and ways to work within and beyond neo-liberal constraints. A conventional strategic plan, complete with targets, prescribed outcomes, milestones, reviews and neo-liberal expectations for standardisation, transparency and measurable performance was discarded in favour of a multi-sensory story that makes materiality and affect central to reconceptualising quality and professionalism. Spices, shopping bag, magic beans, and the absent-presence of a missing pebble provide an alternative means with which to figure professionalism. Violet's Story and all its human, non-human and more-than-human actors work to produce affects and unanswered questions. It does not offer a formula for 'quality' or 'professionalism' rather, it is open-ended and uncertain. This simple story about apparently 'not very much' is acutely provocative, and densely packed with microscopic detail. By dwelling on the mundanity of the everyday it induces wonder at early childhood practices, spaces, relationalities and objects: 'every pebble has a story.' Pursuing the multiple possible stories that each pebble presents takes the early years practitioner on adventures that might reveal an enormous amount about themselves, their values, perceptions, worldviews and practices. Furthermore, Violet's Story provides the staff team with a focus for deep thoughtfulness, and functions as resource and conversation starter for the wider nursery community. What the story does to its readers (parents, Ofsted Inspectors, and you: the reader of this chapter) and what they then do with it acts diffractively. An encounter with Violet's Story creates new stories, multiple interpretations, impressions, imprints, wonderings and wanderings.

The story is a bold and political move by staff at The Red House. They report feeling concerned with normalising discourses of quality that circulate in guidance documents on how to plan, deliver and evaluate their practice (Osgood et al, 2017). They sense and navigate the endless demands to perform 'quality' and 'professionalism' yet, by embracing a new materialist, post-humanist framing for their strategic plan, Violet's Story sets them free from a constant preoccupation to gauge performance against standardised measures. Here we start to see the intimate connection between critique and creativity that Braidotti advocates. By placing the focus on multi-sensory moments, through everyday, mundane and extra-ordinary encounters it is possible to trace the counter narrative of professionalism from within – that celebrates emotion, humour, intuition and compassion – circulating within the space and context of the nursery. These are not personality traits that reside within human subjects, but rather, affective charges that are produced and circulate from material-semiotic-discursive entanglements. It is the early childhood assemblage - comprising nature shelf, smooth pebble, rough pebble, adult-body, Ofsted criteria, child-hands, memories, child:adult ratios, imagined futures, fantasy play, shopping bag, spicy smells, EYFS curriculum and, and and... – that works together to produce other ideas about nursery practice, childhood and professionalism. Crafting a narrative account from a fictional child's embodied perspective of everyday life in the nursery ignites new generative possibilities for the entire nursery community. The narrative strategies within the story act to decentre the human protagonist, Violet, and so bring to the fore all that she is entangled with: smells, sounds, sights and senses which in turn generates new ways for practitioners to become engaged in world-making practices. The crafting of the story, and subsequent engagements with it (as tool for reflection; in discussion with each other, parents and Ofsted) underscores the liveliness of a story and its generative possibilities. With each reading and re-reading something else is produced. Returning to Haraway's insistence that 'the point is to get at how worlds are made and unmade, in order to participate in the processes, in order to foster some forms of life and not others' [Haraway, 1994:59] we can identify precisely how Violet's Story functions to deepen how 'quality' and

‘professionalism’ are thought about and enacted through the organization of space, place, objects and people. As Wolfe (2010:25) stresses:

“Far from surpassing or rejecting the human, post-humanism actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity...it forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of homo sapiens itself by re-contextualising them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own auto-poietic ways of bringing forth the world.”

Such post humanist encounters with neo-liberalism in early years contexts are shaped by wonder, serendipity, unpredictability yet the metanarratives framing the field often act to contain and regulate with serious implications that stifle creativity and create ‘docile bodies that yield to the discourse’ (Foucault, 1980). As Violet’s story demonstrates there are possibilities available to work with, through and across the metanarratives that frame ‘quality’ and ‘professionalism’. By attending to microscopic investigations of seemingly inconsequential, mundane events it becomes possible to reconfigure our relational entanglements with policy, curriculum frameworks and everyday lives lived in early childhood contexts. There are challenges and dilemmas that are felt in minute material-semiotic-discursive encounters but embracing an opened view of the world is to focus on the seemingly inanimate and insignificant and this can afford generative possibilities to realise the ambition of going beyond narrow conceptualisations of professionalism.

Research then becomes more experimental and uncertain, and it allows the leakages between the discourses and frameworks that frame and constrain early years practice, and what else unfolds in the everyday to be identified. Exercising curiosity in early years research and practice offers other, potentially more hopeful, ways to see and be in the world and to reassess established ways of thinking about a range of issues, including professionalism. This does not mean that critique disappears from investigations; unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions, and engaging practices of problematization and challenge, remains vital. Identifying discourses that position educators within regulatory regimes and subject them to the terrors of performativity (Ball, 2003) is important but having done this, what next? What else?

A feminist new materialist mode of researching, practising and theorising privileges creative experimentation over critique but does not abandon commitments to interrogating power and inequity. It is the practice of bringing critique and creativity together that holds generative potential to extend ideas and debates about professionalism in early childhood education. As Lenz Taguchi (2017) urges, we need ways, multiple ways, to avoid getting stuck in familiar ways of thinking and doing. Therefore, attempts to reconfigure how we approach professionalism involves charting the terrain, experimenting and resisting the comforts of recognition, reflection and identification. Or as Colebrook (2015) urges, we might place a focus on important problems and matters of concern in order to chart the conditions of creation so as to transform those conditions and the problem itself.

Violet’s Story charts the relationships between affect and research and insists that questions are asked about the affective processes, and about the collection and production of embodied data, that takes place within a ‘zone of inventiveness’ (Knudsen & Stage, 2015:3) where what counts as ‘data’ is called in to question (St Pierre & Lather, 2013). Generating ‘data’ that

might be considered banal or unsophisticated, mundane or ordinary, such as these entanglements of pebble, shelf, spicy smells, memories, imagined futures and shopping bag are significant because they generate affective forces, that have the capacity to trouble taken-for-granted ideas about early childhood practice and professionalism. Violet's Story insists that professionalism in early childhood contexts is more than an exclusively human endeavour. The multiple materials, the environment, the pace and tempo of the micro-events, the presence of policy discourses and curriculum frameworks hang in the air – it is the relational entanglements of all of these actors that produce varied accounts of how professionalism is sensed. Professionalism is not an intentional human performance, rather, professionalism can be conceptualised as a blurring of boundaries that traditionally prescribe subject or object, life or matter, dull or vibrant. Professionalism emerges through a series of intra-active fluid relations between the human, non-human and more-than-human.

Working with post humanist logic urges that affect and materiality provide the analytical starting point, it therefore becomes possible to dwell on the ruptures and the uncomfortable affective charges that are produced within these minor events (see Osgood 2019a, 2019b; Osgood & Scarlet, 2016; Osgood & Mohandas, 2020, in press for examples of this). Such an approach to reconfiguring ideas in ECE allows for a deep consideration for the ways in which professionalism is produced through these multiple micro events via material-discursive entanglements. It then becomes possible to reach understandings of professionalism as fleeting, fluid, shifting, co-constituted and produced through processes rather than fixed within human subjects. Resisting the urge to stop at critical deconstruction of that which appears obvious when undertaking research in ECE settings (gender asymmetries, social class, race, age differentials, pedagogical shortcomings, imposition of curriculum, regulation of working practices) offers opportunities to figure professional practice more expansively. When research is transversal – that is, able to follow, or sense the myriad connections and intensities that coalesce in micro-events (Renold & Mellor, 2013), and also be oriented towards the not-yet-known, then new knowledges are produced that extend our ideas about early childhood practice and professionalism.



Such complex assemblages of relational entanglements offer alternative ways to consider the politics of seemingly inconsequential events and everyday occurrences within nurseries. In order that educators and researchers might persistently grapple with that which seems mundane, habitual and unremarkable which can produce alternative and more expansive understandings of matters of concern in early childhood contexts. Violet's Story illustrates the possibilities that become available for educators and researchers to become entangled with the materiality of their practice in ways that enable a critical engagement with policy, curriculum, best practice, quality, professionalism and so on, with which they are expected to work and which they in turn shape. As important though is that such approaches challenge habitual ways of thinking and being in early childhood and therefore present generative possibilities to become unstuck. By attending to forces and movements the capacity to affect and be affected opens up possibilities for deeper engagements with what professionalism is and how it gets produced.

Towards the pursuit of worldly justice in ECE

This chapter has sought to illustrate that post structuralist accounts of professionalism stress that it is socially constructed through discourse. Through research framed by a concern with social justice it has been possible to identify how powerful discourses act to produce discursive positionings that early years workers take up (or contest). As professionals, early years practitioners can become fixed, measured and contained by such discourses. Inviting

practitioners to engage in projects of critical deconstruction is productive, since it exposes the ways in which they are positioned and can invite the cultivation of counter discourses (i.e. the critically reflective emotional professional in place of the competent technician). This chapter has then gone on to explore the intimate connection between critique and creation by working with posthumanist logic to reconfigure how professionalism gets produced. This has involved a close examination of world-making practices (Haraway, 2008) that routinely unfold in everyday nursery practice. Taking opportunities to step back to observe the material-semiotic-discursive entanglements that are unfolding within early years contexts everyday, makes it possible for the familiar to become strange, and to ask the what if and what else questions about matters of concern in early childhood. Expanding our conceptualisations of professionalism, beyond humanist concerns with the subject, towards viewing it as emerging through entangled processes, creates possibilities to reshape our pedagogical and research practices so that they become more committed to contributing the public good; in its very broadest sense. I have sought to illustrate that there are possibilities to bring critique and creativity together in generative ways that take debates about professionalism in other directions but that are still invested in recognising that ECE remains a workforce and a sector shaped by and committed to tackling social injustices. I have extended the idea of the 'public' good to include human, non-human and more-than-human actors and to stress that it is through our worldly connections that the ECE community can exercise its capacity to contribute to more liveable worlds through exercising on-going ethical responsibilities to make a difference (Haraway, 2016) however minor. So perhaps the project then becomes one of pursuing worldly justice through our everyday practices which places an emphasis on registering and addressing inequalities of all kinds, not only those created by and endured by humans.

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