**Contemporary Issues in
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Promoting Early Childhood Teacher Professionalism in the Australian Context: the place of resistance

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ABSTRACT The early childhood education (ECE) sector in Australia is marked by a habitus where 'professionalism' is confined to objective, technical practices. The authos suggest that this is a diminished view of professionalism, and one that compromises high-quality ECE. This article is concerned with how teacher professionalism can be re-imagined and practised within an ECE setting in ways that uphold children's rights and interests and emancipate early childhood teachers from technical, deprofessionalising constraints. Through a case study of professionalism in a reputable high-quality long-day-care centre in Sydney, Australia, the article extends thinking about teacher activism and promotes resistance-based professionalism as one way of producing an alternative habitus about quality ECE and the integral role early childhood teachers play in such provision.

Introduction

> If we take seriously the familiar arguments about the growing weight of organized knowledge in modern economies and political systems, then teachers' capacities to operate as designers and producers of knowledge is [*sic*] important to the vitality of education. (Connell, 1995, quoted in Ozga, 2000, p. 6)

Written some 15 years ago in the context of increasing globalisation, this excerpt from Connell suggests that it is incumbent on teachers to contest and contribute to the knowledge base that informs and responds to policy development. This imperative seems timely today as governments in many countries endeavour to improve the quality of early childhood education (ECE) and, to this end, professionalise the ECE workforce (Urban, 2008). As observed by Urban (2008), such endeavours typically involve the imposition of frameworks grounded in hierarchical conceptualisations of knowledge and knowledge production. Professionalism in ECE settings, therefore, becomes positioned as technical standardised applications of top-down, 'expert' knowledge that meets objective accountability measures for the purpose of attaining optimal developmental outcomes for children.

Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), Urban (2008, p. 135) argues that this diminished view of early childhood teacher professionalism constitutes a 'prevailing professional habitus' of ECE. 'Habitus' in this context refers to the values, dispositions, discourses, rules and ways of behaving that constitute and reflect the cultural histories of ECE. Collectively, these establish the parameters for what is deemed professionally acceptable, albeit providing early childhood teachers with some

scope for 'improvisations' (Bourdieu, 1977) in their practice. Habitus, therefore, is influential in shaping current practices and the future trajectories of the ECE profession.

Recent policy initiatives in Australia suggest that the federal Labor government is following the quality–professionalism trajectory described by Urban (2008). The government's Early Childhood Development Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009c) seeks to, amongst other goals, enhance the quality of ECE settings. To this end, ECE reforms include an investment of A$126.6 million for initiatives designed to increase the supply and improve the quality of the early childhood workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009b). Initiatives to professionalise the early childhood workforce include an increase in university early childhood teaching places, the removal of vocational training fees for childcare diplomas and advanced diplomas, and incentives for graduate early childhood teachers to work in disadvantaged areas (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009b). These workforce initiatives are in conjunction with the Council of Australian Governments' collaborative National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009d). This agenda has already led to the development of a national Early Years Learning Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a) and encompasses nationally consistent quality standards, a quality ratings system, and a streamlining of regulation and accreditation mechanisms. Proposed national quality standards are also indicative of a move to professionalise the ECE workforce. For example, by January 2014, 50% of staff will be required to have, or be working towards, at least a diploma qualification; all other staff will be required to have completed or at least be enrolled in a childcare vocational qualification; and university-qualified early childhood teachers are to be employed at a proportion to the number of children enrolled (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009e).

Juxtaposing this trajectory, however, is the Australian government's use of 'professional' as an umbrella term for all staff working in ECE centres. For example, a key discussion paper outlining the National Quality Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) states: 'the term "educators" is used to describe all *professionals* who work with children in early childhood education and care' (my emphasis). Similarly, Australia's current national system of accreditation for long-day-care (LDC) centres, in which early childhood teachers are employed, refers to all staff, irrespective of education or qualifications, as 'professionals' (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005). Such a construction of professionalism by government is consistent with discourses of early childhood 'professionals' commonly used in the sector. For example, the Code of Ethics developed by Early Childhood Australia (2006), a peak early childhood advocacy organisation, defines an early childhood professional as 'a person who works with or on behalf of children and families in early childhood settings'.

These discourses are perhaps indicative of a sector whose complexity and fragmentation prohibit consensus on what constitutes 'professional' in the Australian ECE context. As Elliott (2006) notes, the ECE sector is marked by an education/care divide, where preschools are widely regarded as sites that prepare children aged three to five for school and LDC as sites that care for children from birth to school age so as to enable parental workforce participation. Indeed, this divide is reinforced in the recently released National Partnership Agreement on quality ECE and care. This policy document defines LDC as providing 'all day or part-time *care*' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009d, p. 6; our emphasis). In contrast, preschools are said to provide 'an early childhood *education* program' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009d, p. 7; our emphasis). Thus, whilst early childhood teachers work in both settings, those in preschool settings have higher status than their LDC counterparts. Notwithstanding this difference, early childhood teachers lack pay parity with teachers working in the primary school sector; nor do they have a professional registration body with which they can be accredited. In one Australian state, New South Wales (NSW), the NSW Institute of Teachers, a registration body that accredits teachers and teacher preparation courses, excludes early childhood teachers on the basis that they do not teach a NSW Board of Studies curriculum. Collectively, the discourses and the context within which early childhood teachers in Australia work have relegated them to be professionals on the margins (Fenech et al, 2009).

Within such a context, the danger of a loose application of the term 'professional' to all staff working in the ECE sector is the ensuing 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1984, p. 74) about quality and early childhood 'professionals'. Foucault coined this term to refer to the power of discourses to shape and sanction what is regarded to be 'true'. For the purposes of this discussion, the

manufactured and taken-for-granted understanding which emanates from government discourses is that a quality ECE program can be achieved through technical practices that can be administered by any 'professional' staff member and that meet regulatory standards.

We regard such a regime of truth as problematic for several reasons. First, it diminishes the complex and multifaceted nature of quality ECE to normalised, technical practices (Grieshaber, 2002). Second, it fails to recognise early childhood university-qualified teachers as experts, and accordingly limits their capacity to work autonomously and exercise professional judgment in the interests of children and families. In turn, it carries the danger of considering early childhood teachers redundant and merely an expense that drives up the cost of care or 'child storage', as described by Lakoff & Grady (1998) in Woodrow (2007, p. 240). Third, by focusing on the governing of children and staff for predetermined outcomes, it negates ECE settings as sites of political and ethical practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This regime of truth, therefore, considerably narrows the vision for how quality ECE settings might contribute to children, families and the broader community.

The Australian government's move to develop a new national system of quality ECE provides an opportunity for early childhood teachers, as urged by Connell (albeit in a different context), to consider, contest and contribute to the shaping of policy discourses of quality and professionalism in early childhood. This article highlights how early childhood teachers might take up this opportunity by presenting a case study of professionalism in a reputable high-quality LDC centre in Sydney, Australia. Following Dalli (2008, p. 171), the article promotes a 'ground-up perspective on professionalism ... that reflect[s] the reality of teachers' work experiences'. Drawing on the experiences and perspectives of early childhood teachers at this centre, the article shows that for these teachers, the project of 'professionalism' involves three tasks. First is to promote themselves as professionals in ways that resist the 'professional habitus' critiqued by Urban (2008). Second is to contest regulatory frameworks that narrow the parameters of what early childhood teachers as professionals do and how they do it. Third is to contest dominant constructions that do not regard ECE as a specialist field and, as such, dilute the complexity and multidimensional nature of 'quality' ECE. By promoting the 'self-narratives' (Sachs, 2003, p. 132) of teacher participants, this article seeks to generate how teacher professionalism can be re-imagined and practised within and beyond an ECE setting in ways that uphold children's rights and interests and emancipate early childhood teachers from technical, deprofessionalising constraints.

In the next section, we position these teachers' approaches to professionalism within two theoretical frames: activist teacher professionals (Sachs, 2003) and resistance (Foucault, 1980a, 1983). Drawing on both ideas, we promote resistance-based professionalism as a useful strategy by which early childhood teachers can design and produce alternative knowledges about quality ECE and the integral role teacher professionalism plays in this.

Resistance-Based Teacher Professionalism

Reminiscent of the 'professional habitus' critiqued by Urban (2008), Sachs (2003) describes the Australian landscape for teachers in the school sector as a space where trust and respect are lacking, where regulations, controls, policies and normative practices have replaced professional wisdom and judgement, and where, as a result, teacher morale, efficacy and innovation have been eroded. With ever-changing political, economic and social contexts, however, Sachs (2003, p. 121) notes that teacher professionalism as 'a site of struggle between various interest groups' is always in a state of flux. Accordingly, Sachs argues that there is room and, indeed, an imperative for teachers to promote discourses that shape teacher professionalism, for the purposes of improving teachers' status and working conditions and student learning outcomes. What Sachs advocates as a way forward is transformative activist professionalism that is based on collaborative action, critical reflection, and principles of equity and social justice. Activist professionalism is transformative because 'its spheres of interest are concerned with changing people's beliefs, perspectives and options regarding the importance of teaching, the social location of teachers and the role of competency and intelligent teachers in various education institutions' (Sachs, 2003, p. 146). Activist teacher professionals cultivate trust within their setting and beyond with other stakeholders such as parents and policy makers; demonstrate active trust where philosophical approaches, values and

approaches are collaboratively and openly debated and owned; and critically reflect on the 'state of play' so as to generate options where they can act rather than be acted on.

We consider the notion of an activist professional to be a useful way forward for early childhood teachers. The current period of major early childhood policy reform in Australia provides a timely opportunity for activist early childhood teachers to promote themselves as teacher professionals integral to the provision of quality ECE. Given their marginalised stature, however, we propose that to be an activist early childhood teacher professional necessitates a strategy in addition to those suggested by Sachs (2003). In particular, we promote an 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 259) as an integral part of early childhood teachers' repertoire of professional practice if they are to produce an alternative professional habitus than that critiqued by Urban (2008). Such resistance is grounded in ethical practice that is driven by an intentional commitment to continually deconstruct taken-for-granted truths and reconstruct practices. Following Dahlberg & Moss (2005), practising with an 'ethic of resistance' enables the ECE setting to be a site that values children, families and staff as ethical actors in respectful relationships with each other.

Just as the specifics of this ethical practice will vary from context to context (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), so too will teacher professionals' application of a resistance ethic. Foucault's (1977, 1978, 1980b) consideration of power and resistance is informative here. Foucault highlighted the repressive *and* productive capacity of disciplinary power. That is, through modes such as disciplinary tactics, regulations and surveillance, power can objectify individuals to conform to normative truths and practices. In turn, power can transform 'individuals into subjects' (Foucault, 1983, p. 208) that are mere 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 138) which do not critically engage with prevailing discourses.

Foucault (1978), however, rejected a simplistic linear, unidirectional 'repressive hypothesis' construction of power in which power is imposed on 'the powerless' by 'the powerful'. Rather, acknowledging the productive capacity of power, he asserted that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). In any power relation, such as that embodied in the prevailing professional habitus described in this article, marginalised groups have at their disposal freedom to choose how they will respond. Compliance is one response, resistance another. Should the subject choose resistance, then this can be exercised at multiple points and in a myriad of ways (Foucault, 1978). According to Foucault:

> these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. (Foucault, 1978, pp. 95-96)

Such a construction of resistance seemingly necessitates individual agency. Agency is not, however, an inherent characteristic of any individual (teacher) (Davies, 1990). Rather, agency is 'a matter of position or location within or in relation to particular discourses' (Davies, 1990, p. 346). To reject the 'constitutive force' (Davies, 1990, p. 359) of prevailing discourses requires critical engagement with these discourses, and personal resources such as knowledge and motivation to create and enact alternative ways of being and doing. As Davies later notes:

> Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self. Rather it is the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. Agency, in such a definition, comes from the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one's identity. (Davies, 2004, p. 4)

This article examines the agency, in the form of resistance, of early childhood teachers from one case study centre in Australia. It focuses particularly on their critical engagement with prevailing ECE discourses that they perceive hinder their practices of ethics. Their engagement with these discourses provides a springboard for their resistance. In his analysis of Foucault's conceptualisation of resistance, Hoy comments that:

> the critical resistance to normalization stems from the sense that normalization has spread too far in our lives, and is blocking many other viable forms of life. This constriction of possibilities is achieved when normalization asserts the norms as necessary, or natural, or universal. (Hoy, 2004, p. 66)

The essentialising and universalising of the 'professional habitus' that Urban (2008) critiques has, in the Australian ECE context, cultivated dominant truths about what constitutes professional practice, who an ECE professional is, and what a quality ECE program looks like. In turn, these truths have constrained possibilities for how early childhood teachers practise and how they are regarded by policy makers and the general community. They have also constrained possibilities for what a quality ECE setting might comprise and what outcomes for children it might lead to.

The findings presented in this article will illustrate how teachers in this case study exercise agency as activist professionals through a multiplicity of resistance strategies. These strategies are bound up with the teachers' intent to problematise prevailing truths about early childhood teachers, 'professionals' and 'quality' ECE, and to produce alternative truths that uphold what they perceive to be the rights and best interests of children. In order to contextualise these findings, in the next section we first provide a brief overview of the research project from which this case study is drawn and outline the methodology.

Context and Methods

The data presented in this article are drawn from a larger four-phase Investigating Quality research project. This research aims to investigate elements that support and sustain high quality in Australian centre-based care. Three measures of quality – the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*, revised edition (ECERS-R), the *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale*, revised edition (ITERS-R) (Harms et al, 1998, 2003) and Australia's national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005) – are being used in the project to determine the level of quality provided by a sample of LDC centres, that is, centres that provide education and care for a minimum of 10 hours per day, 48 weeks of the year for children from birth to six years of age. This sample was drawn from a longitudinal Child Care Choices (CCC) study (Bowes et al, 2003) that investigated the impact of multiple care arrangements on children's development. With university ethics approval, all LDC centres in the CCC study were invited to participate in the Investigating Quality study. Seventy-three centres (62.9%) agreed to participate. Phase 1 of the study involved ascertaining the level of quality provided by these centres, as per the observation and accreditation instruments. Phase 2 involved identifying six centres deemed by the measures to be providing consistent high quality, and inviting them to participate as a case study centre where elements that contributed to the high quality scores would be explored.

In order to prepare for Phase 2, Mia Mia, a reputable (nationally and internationally) high-quality LDC centre that had not participated in the CCC study, was used as a pilot case study centre. Mia Mia has a consistent high-quality accreditation profile, and ITERS-R and ECERS-R observations also deemed this centre to be operating at high quality. The centre is a university-based centre where staff engage in research into children's development, curriculum and other aspects of ECE. The centre is licensed for 51 places and caters for children from six weeks to five years of age. Of the 13 permanent full-time contact staff employed, five are university-qualified early childhood teachers. A further seven have technical college qualifications: five have one-year full-time diplomas and another two staff have one-year part-time Certificate 3 qualifications. The centre is not-for-profit and has been operating for 15 years. Four of the current staff (including the director and a team leader, both of whom have a Master of Education qualification) have been at the centre since its inception. Two other team leaders have been at the centre for five and six years respectively. The leadership and expertise of the centre's director has been acknowledged through her contributions to ECE and care policy reform as an invited member of key government advisory committees. The centre operates as a learning community, both internally through weekly team and critical programming meetings, and externally through regular tours provided for local, national and international students, practitioners and policy makers.

A case study design was used to explore the elements that supported and sustained high quality at this centre. Qualitative data were gathered via four teacher, two parent and five child focus groups; two interviews with the centre director; a three-minute video prepared by staff in response to the question 'What is it about your centre that makes it high quality?'; centre

documents and policies; and four teaching resource videos that explain the centre's philosophy and programs. In this article, data from the director interviews and teacher focus groups are presented.

The director interviews were semi-structured and sought to gain information pertaining to structural, process, adult work, and any other aspects of quality that featured at the centre. The focus groups, also semi-structured, were conducted with four of the centre's early childhood teachers. These discussion groups sought to explore in more depth the data that had been gathered through other mediums, such as the video segments and the ITERS-R and ECERS-R observation ratings. The participating teachers stressed that the views they expressed were those generally held by all centre staff, irrespective of position or qualifications. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the identity of the participating teachers.

In a shift away from the primarily modernist framing of the earlier phase of the larger study and the criteria for selection of case study sites, the interviews and focus groups were intended to be teacher- and not researcher-driven. We considered this shift important, given the marginalisation of early childhood teachers noted earlier, and the stark absence of university-qualified early childhood teachers' voices in quality ECE research (Fenech, under review). It also enabled the incorporation of a wider range of theoretical and analytic perspectives, and hence, we argue, richer insights than would have been possible within a uniformly modernist framing.

Transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were analysed using a two-stage process. The first stage involved thematic analysis, guided by Braun & Clarke's (2006, p. 82) definition of a theme as a 'patterned response or meaning' that 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question'. In Braun & Clarke's (2006) terms, the thematic analysis was theoretical rather than purely inductive, as our readings of the transcripts, coding of the data and identification of patterns were informed by our interest in the constructs of activist professionals (Sachs, 2003), resistance (Foucault, 1978) and agency (Davies, 1990, 2004) as analytical tools. In the second stage of the analysis process, segments of transcripts that illuminated the themes were scrutinised more closely for underlying assumptions, knowledge claims, identity positionings, binary oppositions and other examples of 'discursive work' (MacLure, 2003, p. 19) to enable a more in-depth examination of the participants' constructions and enactment of professionalism.

Findings

Illustrative of Davies's (2004) notion of agency, the interview and focus group data indicated that teachers at Mia Mia were acutely aware of and resistant to the 'professional habitus' critiqued by Urban (2008). They recognised that 'there's that kind of notion that there's one way to do it' (Jeswina, Focus Group 1), whereby just as with a knitting pattern, you 'knit one, purl one and you'll be right' (Carol, Focus Group 1).

The teacher participants rejected the repressive capacity of such technical approaches to professionalism. Rather than practising as 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 138), teachers at Mia Mia are:

> open to thinking about things and open to exploring possibilities and being excited by things that aren't set by standard operational procedures ... that notion that you have to have a standard operational procedure on a clipboard means that you think people are incapable and incompetent. We don't want people who are incapable of solving their own problems. We want people who are aspirational thinkers and problem solvers. (Maggie, Director Interview 1)

This excerpt highlights the freedom these teachers have to think, to deconstruct and to reconstruct problems and practices. This freedom is exercised as resistance to standardised technical practices that demean the expertise and competence of these teacher professionals. Indeed, Carol (Focus Group 1) referred to 'the craft of teaching' as it is practised in the centre, where their decisions and practices are made in an ethical response cycle (Newman & Pollnitz, 2002) that begins and ends with the question, 'Is this in the best interests of the child?' This cycle is in keeping with the critical, collaborative and transformative practices of Sachs's (2003) activist professionals.

Although teacher professionalism and the notion of 'professional habitus' were not explicit foci of the study, the twin themes of professionalism and resistance emerged from an analysis of the interview and focus group data. When these identified themes were reported back to the participants, Maggie contextualised the findings with this vignette:

The resistance epiphany: a practitioner's tale

> As an early childhood teacher many years ago I had a chance encounter with a practitioner who had seemingly lost her heart for her work. This practitioner remarked that expectations for practice, pedagogy and the aesthetics of the learning environments in a long day program could never be the quality expected or of that achieved in a preschool program. Her words, 'It could never happen in childcare!', have remained with me for these past twenty years. There was no compromise to be reached in the ensuing conversation where any argument about children's rights and families' rights (not to mention the staff's rights) fell on deaf ears. The soporific culture of pessimism and hopelessness had become ingrained for this practitioner and pervaded the dynamics of the life lived in that centre, children, staff and families.

> Ultimately this teacher's stinging retort became my touchstone throughout my journey as an early childhood teacher, when possibilities for difference or improvement were being challenged, when goals for practice were not being met and when regulatory requirements became constraining. At that moment of time, the conversation for me was challenging and confronting, but as the years have passed by I can say how this encounter has shaped my beliefs and values and ideals. Through this conversation I was able to crystallise what was important to me as a teacher, and that was the rights of the child along with those of staff and families. This difficult conversation became my talisman in all of my efforts to resist the normalisation of practice and the implied qualities of Urban's (2008) 'professional habitus'.

> It is possible in a long day program, with some determination and collaboration, to begin to resist what already exists, such as minimum standards, poor working conditions, institutional environments and a legislative framework that constrains practice. It cannot happen immediately but with a shared vision about what could be, it is possible. Children and families and staff have the right to a place to share with the community, to engage in learning and to build relationships that are socially just and equitable. It is a teacher's ethical responsibility to resist and to have a vision of what can be. (Maggie, Centre Documentation)

The perspective of the practitioner noted in this vignette is characteristic of discourses that position LDC as inferior in quality when compared to preschool. As such, the encounter described here is indicative of the repressive capacity of power which, in this instance, had the potential to repress Maggie's vision for rights-based quality LDC. Critically engaging with this encounter, however, enabled Maggie to recognise and resist its subjectifying force. Drawing on the productive capacity of the power circulating in this encounter, Maggie used the freedom she was able to exercise as centre director to begin practising an 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 259) to prevailing truths about quality in LDC. Specifically, and as indicated in the interview and focus group data, Maggie, with staff at her centre, engaged and continue to engage in ongoing tasks of resistance-based teacher professionalism that seek to promote alternative truths. Following Foucault (1978), these are not grand acts of resistance, but rather tasks that can be implemented in day-to-day routines and practices. Three of these tasks will now be discussed in turn.

Task 1: promote and develop themselves as professionals but in ways
that resist the 'professional habitus' described by Urban (2008)

Sachs (2003) highlights three traditionally understood characteristics of professionalism: a foundation of expert knowledge, skills and ethics; practitioner autonomy; and responsibility by way of sound judgments, ongoing professional development, and ethical and reflective practice. While concurring with these professional attributes, we suggest that one could practise as a professional in these ways but within the confines of the technical, prescriptive 'professional habitus' noted by Urban (2008). Teachers at Mia Mia exemplified these traditional characteristics whilst resisting the dominant 'professional habitus'. This resistance was through the promoting of an alternative construction of activist teacher professionalism that demonstrated open, fluid, critically reflective practices grounded in an 'ethics of care' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 73).

The work of the teachers in this centre is informed by a mix of theory that draws from Bruner, Bronfenbrenner, Malaguzzi, Dewey, Rogoff and Steiner, as well as from social

constructivism and social justice principles. For example, Dewey's notion that 'children have a preference for real tasks' (Maggie, Director Interview 1) means that children use real pots, pans and utensils in the kitchen and real spades to dig in the sandpit. In a regulatory environment focused on risk management (Fenech et al, 2008) such practices could be deemed as unprofessional. Yet they are indicative of these teachers' 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 259) to normalised practices that are contrary to their knowledge and beliefs, and an ongoing critical reflection about the work they do. In the words of one teacher at the centre, Carol:

> The real quality in [our centre] is that it is such an active group of thinkers and that everything is thought about and looked at from a theoretical, from a practical, from a philosophical, from a humanitarian, from a social justice point of view; we think about everything. It would probably drive some people nuts, but that real education and real learning with yourself and with young children must have those things. (Focus Group 1)

Clearly, teachers at Mia Mia have the discursive, personal and social resources (Davies, 1990) to be agentic. Nonetheless, for these teachers, having university teaching qualifications does not automatically equate with professional practice or quality ECE. As Osgood (2009, p. 743) warns, an approach to professionalism that is grounded in standards such as qualifications carries the danger of narrowing professionalism to 'a tick-box culture of performativity that obscures more opaque aspects of professionalism'. From the perspective of the teachers at Mia Mia, their university teaching qualifications provide them with a strong platform from which to think about and engage deeply with children. Far from being 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 138), these teachers intentionally and continually reflect on their relationships and pedagogy so as to resist normative practices. These ideas are also evident in the following excerpt, where Maggie, the centre's director, describes a situation where another teacher, Jeswina, could have 'overlooked' a potentially rich learning experience:

> When Jeswina was just keeping an eye on a group of boys and they were jumping in and out of the boat and running around the playground, she said, 'Come on, what's going on, tell me?' They said, 'There's a blue whale, we're rescuing this blue whale.' On one hand, she was just going to say, 'Yes, okay, there is a blue whale, now settle down to some work at the clay table, let's get on with it.' Instead, she said, 'Well, what sort of blue, what do you mean there is a blue whale, where is it, how big is it?' So then that started off that whole notion that this whale was living in the playground and from this simple encounter, a year-long project investigating the children's views and understandings of the blue whale, and how they give birth, unfolded. It's a good example of how the curriculum grows in our program. (Director Interview 1)

In this scenario, Jeswina's capacity to think about how she might extend the play experience of these four boys prompted her to extend their thinking about what was happening. Jeswina resisted normative 'professional' practices that value product (for example, a clay construction) over process. She also resisted objectifying the children and dismissing their rescuing of the whale as silly. Rather, she intentionally engaged with the children in a way that led to a rich sequence of events which involved all the children at the centre and their parents. Ensuing exploratory activities included measuring how long the whale might be; drawing what it looked like; making a to-scale-size model using hundreds of plastic milk bottles filled with blue water; writing a letter to families requesting bottles for the model exercise; and going on an excursion to look at a rock carving of a whale. According to Maggie, this curriculum of activities would not have eventuated without Jeswina deconstructing the children's claim that they were saving a whale: 'You've got to have teacherly thinking for an event to be as momentous as this was' (Maggie, Director Interview 1).

Teachers at Mia Mia extend their knowledge and skills through ongoing professional development opportunities such as workshops and conferences. Utilising another everyday point of resistance (Foucault, 1978), however, these staff resist a normalising of professional development to technical training. While they regard technical training such as occupational health and safety as important, professional development for these teachers necessitates planning and utilising opportunities that challenge and stretch their thinking and beliefs. To this end, team leaders have weekly curriculum meetings where they mentor and challenge each other, and intentionally deconstruct and reconstruct their own and each other's practices. The risk taking and trust that these processes entail facilitates a growing of each teacher's professional knowledge and skills base,

and is reminiscent of the trust and collaboration that activist teacher professionals need to cultivate within their own settings (Sachs, 2003):

> *Jeswina*: The curriculum meetings for me certainly meant that mentoring is extremely active within [our centre] ... But also challenging yourself within that – you know, like handing over something and trusting the people you're handing it to ... Whenever I talk to colleagues, that's something that I'm always questioned on – 'How do you do that?' 'How do you hand over a piece or work and say "here you go"?'

> *Maggie*: It's like opening your underwear drawer. It can be very confronting to have someone rifle through your thoughts and disagree with your ideas.

> *Jeswina*: Yeah. Because it is deeply personal and it's very easy to be insulted because someone didn't get what you meant. I think it's about trust as well – that I trust that what's best for the school is underpinning all of it and that's also enriching me as a teacher because I'm not just thinking about me and that I'm right and that I've done it this way. We're being challenged and pushed to always think bigger. (Focus Group 1)

This excerpt highlights the productive potential of the power which circulates amongst a teaching team that is supportive and trusting of each other. By resisting what is, to them, the superficial safety of normalised technical practices, they actively expose themselves to critique on an ongoing basis and, in doing so, create their own professional habitus that supports the interests of children and families at their centre.

The teachers at Mia Mia also work with a high degree of autonomy and engage in ongoing ethical decision making and practices. Maggie (Director Interview 1) noted that: 'I think we're lucky in that we've had that autonomy to run the ship the way that we have.' The teachers at this centre exercise professional autonomy in ways that are in keeping with their knowledge, values and beliefs about high-quality ECE. For example, Maggie, in collaboration with staff, management and families, introduced a policy that the centre would no longer accept one-day enrolments (as it was their experience that this was problematic for those children):

> We moved away from having children for one day a week, that was kind of our first foray into rethinking ... to really rethinking how is it for children. Spending just one day in a program, it is so difficult for them ... that notion of equity found its way basically throughout our endeavours to have practice in place that is in the best interests of the child and not just the workplace needs of families and corporations. (Maggie, Director Interview 1)

This example is illustrative of these teachers' rejection of the repressive capacity of prevailing discourses that threaten to narrow the parameters of professional practice and quality ECE. The positioning of LDC as subsided care that enables parents' participation in the workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009d) can lead some families to enrol their children into long-day programs for just one day, sometimes as a top-up to other care arrangements. Moreover, in particular regional areas where there are not enough places for the number of children in the community, the regulatory body may request a centre to offer one-day enrolments. According to teachers at this centre, however, these positionings of LDC do not place the child at the heart of the arrangement. In the experience of these staff, children enrolled for only one day a week experience difficulties in separating, forming relationships with the staff and the other children, and engaging in play. In the teachers' view, one-day enrolments equate to 'child storage' (Lakoff & Grady, 1998, in Woodrow, 2007, p. 240). In the context of the 'constitutive force' (Davies, 1990, p. 359) of such positioning and pressures, these teachers practise an 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 259) and exercise freedom via a contentious policy that is consistent with their 'ethics of care' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 73).

> *Task 2: contest regulatory frameworks that narrow the parameters*
> *of what early childhood teachers as professionals do and how they do it*

Citing the Australian context, Woodrow (2008) cautions that prevailing discourses and contextual factors, including regulations, constrain early childhood teachers' professional identities. Indeed,

recent Australian (Fenech et al, 2006; Fenech & Sumsion, 2007) and international research (Novinger & O'Brien, 2003; Osgood, 2006) highlights how regulatory frameworks and discourses can diminish early childhood teachers' autonomy, relegate active decision making to prescriptive technical practices and, ultimately, diminish the need for teachers in early childhood settings. In these ways, while the term 'professional' may still be used in ECE policy and practice documents, in essence the meaning of the term is diluted to 'quasi-professional'.

The regulatory environment in which LDC centres operate offered teachers at Mia Mia further points of resistance (Foucault, 1978). Specifically, the teachers demonstrated resistance to the constraining effect of two regulatory frameworks that all staff working in LDC are accountable to. First is the NSW Children's Services Regulation (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2004), which outlines structural requirements such as child–staff ratios, group sizes and teacher qualifications that centres must comply with if they are to be licensed. The centre reported here resists truths embodied in the Regulation as to what minimum standards constitute quality LDC for children. In particular, resistance takes the form of exceeding required standards for teachers and staff–child ratios for children under two years. Whilst only legally required to employ two university-degree-qualified teachers, Mia Mia employs five. Moreover, while the Regulation stipulates a ratio of 1 : 5 for children under two years, the centre operates with a 1 : 3 ratio.

Exceeding the Regulation's minimum standards in this way opens up possibilities for these teachers to be agentic and practise and develop as activist professionals with the rights and interests of children at the centre of their practice. For example, referring back to the anecdote described earlier, where Jeswina drew out children's thinking about the whale, Maggie emphasised the point that such a rich curriculum opportunity may not have occurred had the centre been operating with minimum standards. Similarly, Maggie highlighted how exceeding regulatory requirements and employing a core group of early childhood teachers enables teacher professionalism to surpass technical practices:

> Collaboration makes it exciting because you have an audience for your thinking ... that building on knowledge together is exciting. Collaboration stops working with children being a job. It stops being just breaking rocks when we're thinking out loud, together. (Director Interview 1)

Clearly, these teachers do not engage with state regulations as 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). Their deconstruction of normalised standards has propelled them to implement structural standards that are in keeping with their professional ethic. Using their freedom in this way has, in turn, produced a resistance base that guards their professional practice from being reduced to technical acts of 'breaking rocks'.

The second regulatory framework that teachers in LDC in Australia are accountable to is the national system of accreditation (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005). Known as the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS), this system is intended to build on the structural accountability provided by state regulations. The primary focus of the QIAS is process quality, that is, aspects that contribute to children's quality experiences, such as interactions with staff. The teacher participants outlined multiple ways in which they considered this system created a professional habitus that undermined teacher professionalism and the need for teachers in LDC. First, they perceived that the system reduced professional practice to measurable, auditable practices, a problematic approach for staff because 'our practice and pedagogy and what we think and do is untickable' (Maggie, Focus Group 2). Second, they were concerned that the same QIAS ratings were given to a spectrum of centres with variable (professional) practices. The participants interpreted this to mean a standardising of quality and practice. Third, the teachers considered the QIAS to be limited to 'the nuts and bolts' (Maggie, Focus Group 2) that can be observed and ticked off. This limited focus undermined the complexities these teachers considered were involved in providing high-quality ECE. Fourth, they regarded the QIAS as 'a Trojan horse; it's just a hollow system because it never addressed the basic structural elements of quality which was staff qualifications, ratios, group size and the practice that could flow from that' (Carol, Focus Group 2). Because of this limitation, the QIAS could rate two centres as providing the same level of quality, irrespective of whether one centre exceeds the minimum regulatory standards and the other does not. Fifth, the teachers highlighted an inherent bias in the QIAS, that is, it promoted a family–staff relationship whereby staff had all the responsibilities and families had all the rights. Such a relationship was perceived by these teachers as inequitable and one that undermined them as

professionals. Sixth, the participants noted that some QIAS assessors who have rated their centre have had qualifications, knowledge and skills that were not commensurate with the participants' own expertise.

Acknowledging the importance of regulatory accountability, these teachers met the requirements of the Regulation and QIAS as activist professionals. Whilst meeting their regulatory obligations, they also engaged in acts of resistance that sought to problematise the constraining capacity of these requirements and promote alternative truths about quality LDC, early childhood teachers and regulatory accountability.

On this latter point, Maggie called for a reconceptualised regulatory environment based on principles of differentiated regulatory requirements according to demonstrated track record. In Maggie's words:

> The more you need support in meeting a regulation, then the more powerful will be the
> regulators. The least you need support from the regulators and the more knowledgeable and
> ethical you are, the least you need them. (Focus Group 1a)

This view is a deconstruction of regulatory modes of surveillance, promoted in government discourses as ensuring quality LDC. At Mia Mia, surveillance via QIAS monitoring is regarded as a diminished way of conceptualising quality ECE and teacher professionalism. What is privileged in discourses such as the QIAS are technical, tick-box practices – practices which Osgood (2009) argues produce a limited professional habitus of performativity. By troubling such performative modes of regulation and advocating for alternative means of teacher accountability, these teachers are actively seeking to produce relations of power between teacher professionals and regulatory bodies whereby teachers such as those in this case study are given greater freedom to practise and promote professionalism grounded in an ethical response cycle (Newman & Pollnitz, 2002).

Task 3: uphold high-quality early childhood education and care as a specialist field that is complex and multidimensional

In order to promote teacher professionalism further, a third task that the teacher participants in this study engage in is to uphold ECE as a specialist field in which high quality is conceptualised as complex and multidimensional. Like the previous two tasks, this task involves resisting and transcending the diminished professional habitus critiqued by Urban (2008) that can emanate from policies seeking to 'professionalise' the ECE workforce. To this end, multiple points of resistance (Foucault, 1978) are utilised. One is teachers' resisting of language constructions that negate ECE as a professional domain. These teachers, therefore, do not refer to their centre or their practice as 'childcare' or as a 'service'. For them, 'childcare' discourses establish a false dichotomy between education and care, and privilege a narrow view that ECE is about minding children for working parents. In these teachers' minds, 'childcare' has connotations of 'grubby chairs and half-broken equipment' (Carol, Focus Group 1) – an image that does not correspond with quality or professional expertise. Similarly, the notion of 'service' for these teachers is indicative of an inequitable relationship with parents that undermines teacher professionalism. As Maggie reflected:

> We reviewed our documents. Even our handbook, the newsletters, the philosophy, everything
> was couched in terms of 'Well, we're happy to do everything and you don't have to [do
> anything]'. Complete early childhood apologetic language. (Director Interview 1)

Continuing their 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 259), the teachers at Mia Mia seek to actively disrupt such normalising discourses. Instead of a childcare service, for example, all staff refer to the centre as a school. The term 'school' is used not to replicate primary schools with a prescribed curriculum, but as a collaborative community where 'there are teachers and it is a place of learning' (Carol, Focus Group 2). In another disruption, this philosophy applies to the babies' room just as much as the preschoolers'. As Stephanie observed of another centre where the non-teaching director was counted in the staff–child ratios and there were no teaching staff in the babies' room:

> How can you expect things to run as smoothly and then to put as much thinking into what
> happens if the director is counted in the ratios and if they don't have a teacher in there who's

been trained to think; and if they don't have support of diploma staff to help them think, and they just have untrained in the room ... it's the thinking that adds to the experience, that makes it rich and makes it a place where children learn. (Stephanie, Focus Group 3)

A second way in which teachers at this case study centre uphold high-quality ECE as a specialist field that is complex and multidimensional is through resistance to the construction of ECE as a site that objectifies children as passive and vulnerable and who need to be acted 'on'. Numerous resistance strategies are employed to achieve this purpose: for example, using authentic rather than 'kiddiwinks' (Maggie, Director Interview 1) early childhood catalogue materials or resources; collaborating with the children rather than having 'things done around and for them' (Maggie, Director Interview 1); using non-specific, open-ended materials that entice the children to explore, imagine and communicate what these materials might represent; and adopting a mutual rights and responsibilities philosophy, where children are regarded as capable of responsibly caring for things and people at the centre. All strategies are grounded in an 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 259), where children are respected and considered capable. As the following quote from Carol implies, taking such an approach requires thinking and expertise that actively deconstructs an objectifying of children which positions them as 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 138):

> The child you see is the child you teach. If you see a child as capable – you're going to teach to that capability. If you see children ... as children who can manage risk – you're going to give them risks to manage. If you see children as being very vulnerable and unable – and I don't mean risk in the sense of child protection ... I mean risk in physical damage – but if you see a child as being – you know shouldn't have bumps and scrumps – then you're never ever going to give them anything that teaches them about that. So the child you see is the child you teach. (Carol, Focus Group 1)

A third way in which these teachers promote ECE as a specialist field, and thus another point of resistance, is the ECERS-R and ITERS-R ratings instruments' denoting of quality (Harms et al, 1998, 2003). For these teachers, these measures oversimplify the complex and multidimensional aspects of a high-quality centre and, in doing so, diminish the need for teacher professionalism beyond technical practices. For example, and as the following excerpt illustrates, the centre did not receive a high rating on the 'displays of children's work' item. Yet for Maggie and Carol, a privileging of tangible products such as children's artwork diminishes quality practices and processes:

> *Maggie*: Well, I think that really harks back to that traditional notion of teaching that you deify the product, whereas, for us, the process is so much more important. So that's why we don't have a huge amount of children's work displayed. We might have one or two pieces but we'll certainly have events that the children have been involved in documented around the place. So, to us, that's children's work. The engagement in an event or an experience that we've found to be quite interesting or intriguing ... That, to us, is so powerful. How did the children negotiate that task, solve that problem? How did they come to that change in their thinking or challenge their teacher's opinion about something? That's what we track and follow, their processes, rather than what they made in the end.

> *Carol*: And, you see, because if you're constantly talking about children's work as being something they've made in the end, then the intangible stuff that is about being a human you can never put up on a wall. You can never put up on a wall the moment when Kylie stopped screaming and talked. To get something she needed instead of just throwing her head back and yelling, she actually said, 'Can I have a piece?' ... Work is not about seven little ducks that have been coloured in and painted the same and put on a wall ... it's more the process that the child is engaged in that you would want to celebrate. (Focus Group 2)

These perspectives and practices are indicative of a resistance to regimes of truth that privilege products (children's works) as evidence of children's learning and quality ECE. In deconstructing these truth regimes, these teachers are alert to the dangers they pose: performative practices on the part of children and staff and a diminished view of children's learning. These teachers resist the constitutive potential of these truths, choosing instead to exercise agency in ways that uphold their 'ethics of care' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 73).

Discussion

In response to the prevailing professional habitus, this article has promoted resistance-based professionalism that is grounded in a deep commitment to interrogating and actively challenging dominant truths which constrain professional practice and quality in ECE. In sharp contrast to technically based notions of professionalism embedded in government and other prevailing early childhood discourses, resistance-based professionalism promotes early childhood teachers as fundamental to the provision of high quality; contests the power of regulatory frameworks to tightly prescribe what early childhood teachers do and what quality centres should look like; and upholds ECE as a specialist, complex field. In these ways, teachers at this case study centre have resisted the capacity of technically based professionalism policy discourses to control them (Ozga, 2000). Rather, they have constituted their own 'professional habitus'; one that is markedly different from that critiqued by Urban (2008). Following Dahlberg et al (2007), these teachers' habitus involves them continually constructing their knowledge and skills through collaboration, critical reflection and meaning making, and with a focus on ethical practice and social justice. In these respects, they are drawing on their own professional subjectivities to develop and promote an alternative 'insider', ground-up construction of professionalism (Osgood, 2009) which embodies the activist professionals described by Sachs (2003). Their ethic of resistance, however, which is so central to their activism, appears to add a new dimension to Sachs's conceptualisation of activism.

Resistance-based professionalism requires capital in the Bourdieuian sense of resources that can be mobilised in pursuit of projects (Crossley, 2005). A defining feature of capital is its exchange value. In other words, capital can be used 'instrumentally to procure further goods', rather than merely enjoyed for 'its intrinsic rewards and uses' (Crossley, 2005, p. 30). The teachers at Mia Mia possessed considerable capital, including a peer group of like-minded, critically thinking university-qualified teachers; a highly supportive management body of early childhood experts and families; and parents prepared and able to pay fees that supported above-regulation ratios and teacher qualifications. They also had a great deal of professional knowledge and, crucially, have become widely recognised for their expertise. In Bourdieuian terms, their capital was both cultural (professional competence and other resources valued within ECE) and symbolic (recognition, reputation and status).

Many early childhood teachers in Australia and internationally may not have access to as much capital as the teachers in this study. As Davies (1990, p. 341) notes: 'agency may be discursively constructed as a positioning made available to some but not to others'. Questions arise, then, about the capacity of teachers more broadly to be agentic, and whether the resistance-based professionalism that characterised the habitus of the teachers in this study is likely to have transformative potential beyond their immediate context. Much will depend on the uses that they, and other teachers with similar capital, can make of it and what sorts of exchanges they are able to negotiate. The possibilities of a 'paradigmatic shift' in early childhood professionalism (Urban, 2008, p. 145) will also depend on the extent to which teachers with relatively little capital might benefit from such exchanges.

In Australia, a recent report to the Australian government by the Expert Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (2009) contained encouraging signs that policy makers may be becoming more attuned to resistance-based professionalism and that the views of early childhood teachers like those portrayed in this article might be beginning to make some inroads into policy environments. Citing concerns that currently regulatory requirements in Australia had become too prescriptive in ways that were impeding professional practice (Fenech et al, 2006), the Panel advocated for a responsive approach to regulation based on the dual regulatory pyramid model proposed by Braithwaite et al (2007). A responsive approach recognises that differences in motivations, professional conduct and professional capacities require a repertoire of strategies for regulatory monitoring (Braithwaite, 2002).

In Braithwaite et al's (2007) model, each of the dual regulatory pyramids encompasses multiple layers of possible regulatory strategies that can be adopted according to context. The strengths-based pyramid focuses on opportunities and rewards for ongoing professional growth and quality improvement, and conveys optimism about professionals' capacity to self-regulate. In contrast, the regulatory enforcement pyramid focuses on managing risks through sanctions. Both pyramids have a common base that involves working with professionals to identify and encourage

existing or emerging strengths. In this model, the right to work within the strengths-based pyramid would be reserved for those who have demonstrated a commitment to professional growth and improvement, including a commitment to working with others to support their professional growth. A regulatory system based on this model would have the potential to support resistance-based professionalism while, in effect, rendering the term redundant. By encouraging the development of networks of professionals who have earned the right to self-regulate, such an approach could also help to create a dialogically based, critically reflective professional habitus of the kind advocated by Urban (2008) and alluded to by Connell (1995, quoted in Ozga, 2000) in the epigraph to this article.

In many respects, therefore, it is heartening that the Council of Australian Governments, through its National Partnership Agreement to improve the quality of ECE, has agreed to take some steps towards differentiating the assessment requirements for ECE services 'on the principle of earned autonomy and risk profiling' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009d, p. B4), along the lines advocated by Braithwaite et al (2007). Although the details are yet to be finalised, steps such as these offer at least some hope that new spaces for reconceptualising and fostering early childhood professionalism might emerge. In the meantime, we conclude that resistance-based professionalism of the kind described in this article appears to have the potential to play a key role in preparing the ground for a paradigmatic shift in policy and in practice.

Acknowledgements

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