
Discourses of Professionalism in Family Day Care

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ABSTRACT Family day care in Australia is currently undergoing rapid 'professionalisation' within a national reform agenda that seeks to raise and standardise early childhood service quality. Included within this reform is a requirement that all family day care workers obtain formal qualifications and that workers are referred to as 'educators' rather than 'carers'. This study drew on focus groups and interviews with family day care workers, management, government and industry representatives collected as part of a larger study into family day care workers' capacity to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing. Our analysis identified three discourses of professionalisation within family day care that provide important insights into the sector at a time of significant change. Management promoted workers as 'educators' aligned with a neo-liberal, masculine understanding of professionalism and the objective measures used to assess service quality. This discourse excluded what 'carers' felt were important, subjective and maternal aspects of their service delivery. To reconcile these discursive extremes, some workers took up a discourse that emphasised the requirements of their 'job' and the standards of professionalism required by management. In conclusion, we contend that the take-up of educational discourses in family day care produce and reproduce tensions between 'women's work' and 'masculine professionalism' that undermine the sector's attempts to increase their status and recognition.

Introduction

In this article we explore how family day care workers and management conceptualise the work of family day care in light of new government quality assurance standards that seek to 'professionalise' the early childhood sector. Family day care, known alternatively as childminding (Jones & Osgood, 2007) and family childcare (Bromer, 2001), is a form of childcare used internationally. Family day care is non-parental care provided by licensed caregivers in their own homes. In Australia, licensed workers provide care under the management of an accredited scheme, staffed by qualified fieldworkers who oversee the program and visit the caregivers' homes regularly for quality assurance, training and management purposes. In 2008, 11.9% of all Australian children aged 0-4 years accessing formal care attended family day care (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Professionalising Childcare

For many years, as part of a wider, neo-liberal discourse of 'professionalisation' (Bromer, 2001), the 'caring' aspect of childcare has made way for a focus on education (Bloch, 1987). Since this time, definitions of professionalism and implications for the sector have been debated (Osgood, 2004, 2006, 2009; Moss, 2006b; Jones & Osgood, 2007; Woodrow, 2007, 2008; Adams, 2008; Lyons, 2012). The work of early childhood service providers has been aligned with the professional characteristics of school teachers, where the language of education (i.e. Curriculum, assessment, learning outcomes) is contested, yet prioritised (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). As Ortlipp and colleagues suggest, 'while there are benefits in terms of recognition and status in aligning discourses of early childhood more closely with discourses of schooling, there are also concerns that the reification of educational (i.e. Schooling) discourses will result in the marginalisation of other aspects of the early childhood educator's role – such as care' (2011, p. 58). To this end, traditional definitions of 'professionalism' in early childhood have been criticised for accepting a gendered understanding of professionalism whereby the neo-liberal, masculine trait of 'detachment' is prioritised and caring is conflated with incompetence (Osgood, 2006; Woodrow, 2007; Lyons, 2012). Here, the term 'educator' is argued to emphasise the 'rational' over the 'emotional', buttressing the neo-liberal 'naturalness' of managerialism and surveillance (Osgood, 2004, 2006). As Osgood (2006, p. 8) suggests in relation to the early years policy reform in the United Kingdom (UK), 'in neo-liberal discourses there is little room for emotionality or such feminine characteristics that are seemingly unquantifiable or auditable'. The UK Children's Workforce Reform (Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 2006) saw the introduction of 'Early Years Professionals', with the aim of transforming the professional identity of the workforce (McGillivray, 2008). As Osgood (2009, p. 742) points out, however, 'the workforce continues to be constructed as consistently deficient and problematic'.

Australia too has taken up the 'professionalisation' of the early years workforce as part of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011). The NQF is key to the policy reform agenda and includes the first National Quality Standards (NQS) for the early childhood sector, which took effect in January 2012. Prior to this, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) was introduced to all early childhood services as a common foundation for the 'principles, practices and outcomes' of quality early education (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The reform agenda pays particular attention to workforce reform, increased requirements for teacher qualifications and new quality standards (Ortlipp et al, 2011). The NQF requires all workers to have a minimum of Certificate III in Children's Services by 2014, a qualification currently held by 55% of family day care workers (Productivity Commission, 2011).

Discursive examinations of the EYLF have identified that historically dominant discourses in early childhood (such as care and development) have been marginalised in favour of 'new discourses for the early childhood field of education and learning' (Ortlipp et al, 2011, p. 62). The language of the EYLF refers to all 'early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings' as 'educators' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5), a change that not only focuses attention on worker qualifications, but frames their work as having an educational component.[1]

While initial analyses of professionalisation and the EYLF have provided qualified support from workers (Ortlipp et al, 2011; Lyons, 2012), such analyses have focused primarily on centre-based care and have subordinated the experiences of family day care workers. On this point, Lyons (2012, p. 125) notes, 'the coexistence of family day care side-by-side with centre-based children's services, we suggest, diminishes the status of long day care workers and their labour', making the task of gaining increased recognition for the early childhood sector more difficult. Lyons argues that the difficulty experienced by centre-based childcare workers could be avoided if family day care workers were excluded; a position contrary to the current reform agenda which seeks to standardise centre-based and family day care quality.

While the principles and practices of the EYLF were developed to apply equally to centre-based and family day care workers alike (DEEWR, 2009), historical distinctions between the two forms of care exist (Amy, 2009; O'Connell, 2010). For example, international research (Hand, 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008) has explored the determinants of mothers' childcare choices and has identified that parents who 'emphasise the importance of children having close, warm

relationships with adult carers choose family day care, whilst parents who emphasise education and a structured curriculum choose centre care' (Hand, 2005, p. 10). Further, in the Australian and New Zealand classification of occupations, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006, p. 489) describes the duties of a centre-based childcare worker as providing care and supervision for children in education, recreational and developmental activities; whereas family day care workers are described as providing 'care and supervision for babies and children, usually in the carer's own home'.

The disjuncture between emerging regulatory and discursive frameworks and the perceived role of family day care workers poses an interesting challenge. As the practices of centre-based and family day care become more standardised, arising from the requirements of the NQF and the EYLF, family day care workers' unique 'care-focused' identity is obscured. As such, focusing on child 'education' poses a particular challenge for family day care, which previously saw itself as offering a more personal 'second mother' experience (O'Connell, 2010, p. 564). In 2011, Ortlipp and colleagues investigated how early childhood practitioners in Australia conceived of themselves as professionals. However, this study was not specific to family day care. In this study, we seek to extend Ortlipp and colleagues' work by examining how the contested position of family day care within the context of the Australian reform agenda prioritises a particular discourse of professionalism, including how workers and management position themselves in response to the reform agenda.

Methods

This article presents a further analysis of interview and focus group data gathered for a larger, ongoing examination of the effectiveness of an intervention to improve family day care workers' capacity to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing (Davis et al, 2011; Corr et al, forthcoming; Davis et al, 2013). This larger study is being conducted in conjunction with one not-for-profit family day care scheme located in an outer, south-eastern suburb of Melbourne, Australia classified as an area of low socio-economic status (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Participants in the larger study included scheme management, field-workers, individual family day care workers and external bodies, such as government regulators and training providers. Baseline data for the ongoing study were collected in 2010, coinciding with the roll-out of the EYLF and consultation and testing of the NQS.

In line with the purpose of the larger study, data collection focused upon participants' understandings and experiences of promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing within the context of family day care. While the larger study did not set out to examine discourses of professionalism in family day care, the tensions between administrators' and family day care workers' understandings of the nature and role of family day care were immediately apparent in the data collected. Participants often described what they perceived to be the family day care workers' role and the social, organisational and political context within which workers operated. These unsolicited accounts became the focus of this further analysis.

Participants and Procedures

The data for the present analysis were derived from the following sources, which were all transcribed verbatim with the exception of 12 brief telephone interviews with family day care workers that were not recorded, but where notes were taken instead:

1. Brief (5-10 minute) telephone interviews were conducted with 48 consenting family day care workers (68% response rate). Interviews explored worker willingness to increase their knowledge about promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing. All participants were female.
2. Three focus groups were conducted with a sample of workers ($n = 23$) and scheme staff ($n = 5$) for the purpose of designing a capacity building intervention (see Corr et al, forthcoming; Davis et al, 2013 for more detail). Each focus group lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and included questions on facilitators and barriers to changing worker and organisational practice. For these workers, the average length of time working with the scheme was 6.7 years (range: 1

month to 25 years) and in any scheme was 9.6 years (4 months to 25 years). Workers looked after between 2 and 30 children weekly (average 10 per home), aged between 1 month and 16 years (average 4.9 years).

3. Individual telephone interviews of approximately 30 minutes in duration were conducted with 5 workers who could not attend focus groups.
4. Individual face-to-face interviews of approximately 30 minutes in duration were conducted with 3 members of scheme management, a government official, a professional development/training provider, and a peak body for family day care representative to understand their role in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing, as well as barriers and opportunities at scheme, organisation and government levels.

Data Analysis

We analysed all of the data described above to generate a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of professionalisation in family day care in relation to the recently introduced reform agenda. While the purpose of the larger project was not to examine the national reform agenda per se, our reanalysis draws on the words of those involved in family day care to provide important insights into discourses of education, care and professionalism at a time when the sector is going through significant change.

The critical discourse analysis techniques of Fairclough (2001) and Jäger (2001) were used to guide the data analysis. We sought to integrate Fairclough's semiotic approach with Jäger's macro-sociological perspective to examine the interplay between structure and agency in the context of family day care. First, at a micro level, the semantic and rhetorical devices used by participants were examined to explore how they positioned the speaker or others within particular discourses. Second, at the level of discourses, we sought to identify how participants' language was shaped by social relations, such as with other workers, scheme management and regulation. Third, as advocated by Jäger (2001), we examined ideological statements based on their relation to theories of epistemology, human relationships, and professionalism, for example. Taken together, these analytical processes allowed for an examination of the discursive positions constructed and/or occupied by the various actors and how these were framed within larger social processes, particularly the redefinition of family day care within the context of the national reform agenda.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and aid readers' interpretation of the results, several measures were taken. First, in order to continually evaluate whether the findings generated here compared to the natural context, complete transcripts from individual participants were continually re-read during the analysis to identify whether they confirmed, disconfirmed or modified the emerging discourses. During this process, modifications were made such as separating the seemingly similar discourses along the various planes, reflecting the 'worker' or 'administrator' position of the speaker. Further, a draft version of the manuscript was provided to the manager of the family day care scheme under investigation to assess the credibility of the representations made of the sector and the 'types' of workers therein. Finally, we have provided detailed contextual information that allows readers to determine the extent to which this case is applicable to family day care workers and administrators in other jurisdictions or contextual settings (Schwandt, 1997).

Findings

Three distinct discourses emerged that provide examples of various positions and forms of professional ideology and identity work in the context of family day care. The three discourses can be understood along a continuum with the 'They are educators' discourse located at one end, the 'I am a carer' discourse located at the other, and the 'It's the job' discourse occupying a middle, inconsistent, conflicted 'compromise' position taken up by family day care workers who sought to reconcile the two discursive extremes.

The three discourses were differentiated along various 'planes' (Jäger, 2001), which are locations from which various discourses can be made. As such, these three discourses presented here are constructed as being mutually exclusive; as different 'types' of participants occupied

different positions. In the current study these 'planes' represented the positions of government and scheme management who espoused a 'They are educators' discourse, new family day care workers who generally took up the 'educator' discourse within the 'It is my job' discourse, and long-term workers who often rejected it and instead took up an 'I'm a carer' position.

The 'They are an educator' discourse emphasised the need to ensure that family day care workers were indeed providing the type of experience set out in the EYLF. Conversely, the 'I am a carer' discourse emphasised the subtleties of the carer-child relationship and the embodied, subjective and maternal nature of family day care workers' work which was not open to objective scrutiny, measurement and quality assurance. In the middle, the 'It's the job' discourse recognised the subjective work of caring, but sought to make this work visible, more recognised and accountable, thereby appealing to the increasing 'professionalisation' of family day care services. These three discourses will now be described in turn.

'They are educators': the need for quality assurance

The first discourse illustrates contemporary, post-EYLF representations of family day care and emerged here as a distinct discourse taken up primarily by government and scheme administrators. This discourse functioned in two ways: first, by using rhetorical devices to make distinctions between carers and educators; and second, by drawing on the managerial language of 'quality assurance' which has been taken up in education discourse in particular (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Saarinen, 2005) to establish and represent family day care workers within a deficit model that required correction through increased qualifications and greater accountability.

The 'educator' discourse functioned at an institutional level to distance the work of family day care workers from the informal role of mothers and other childminders. Thus, this discourse positioned those who saw themselves as 'carers' as a 'dying breed', as this comment by a participant shows:

The new care providers that come in with qualifications have a far different approach. Some people are still [thinking] 'No, what I do is really, really good. Why are you asking that of me?'. That [view] is definitely diminishing as we have the scheme evolve. (Scheme manager)

One informant described how the distinction between 'carers' and 'educators' was debated at a recent meeting with family day care workers. The function of this debate, however, was to reposition workers' discourse of 'caring' within a discourse of 'educating', rather than recognising the value of 'care' in its own right. For example, a member of scheme management stated:

At the moment we're having quite an interesting conversation about the term 'educator'. And the care providers at the last meeting, it was split 50/50. And passion, immense passion on either side, and so that was one of the things. I said, 'Look ...', because a lot of people were thinking, well half of the group were thinking, 'If you call us an educator, somebody's going to expect a curriculum that you find in a school and that's not what we're here for. We're here for nurturing the children. We're here for being spontaneous'. Everything they outlined, I said, 'That is all education that you're speaking about'. (Scheme manager)

A key to repositioning 'education' within 'caring' was the reference to formal training. A government official noted that the biggest barrier to high standards in family day care 'probably is qualifications'. As a scheme manager also noted:

I don't even interview them [potential family day care workers] now unless they have researched RTOs [Registered Training Organisations] and TAFEs [Technical and Further Education], and what not. (Scheme manager)

Contrary to 'carers' who sought to legitimise caring as a profession, administrators who took up the 'educator' discourse framed the 'problem' with family day care as a lack of qualifications, as 'practice needs to stop being just intuition'. As a government representative noted:

I think part of it is around qualifications and just the attractiveness of the profession. I don't think it's something that most, you know, aspiring people want to go into because I think it's probably a pretty tough job ... I think, with no disrespect to family day care, normally the perception is

that family day care is less likely to provide high quality educational programs. (Government representative)

In addition to prioritising learning outcomes, the 'educator' discourse also established and represented family day care work as a 'profession' like any other, with 'the apparent systematic character of professional-client relations' (Habenstein, 1963, p. 295). Thus 'educators' are positioned within this discourse as having a compartmentalised life where work ends and private life begins:

Participant (P): The more knowledge you have, the easier it is.

Interviewer (I): It makes life manageable?

P: Most definitely. And then we've got people stepping back at the end of the day, closing their door, saying goodbye to the last child and really feeling proud about what they've done.

Here, a family day care worker is represented by management as a rational, detached service provider who can make her life easier by 'stepping back' from her clients. As will be shown, this is in direct contrast to the 'carer' discourse that establishes service quality as the messy, embedded personal relationships that make children 'comfortable' and sustains carers' businesses over time and across generations.

Given the conflation between service quality and learning outcomes within the 'educator' discourse, the supervision and monitoring of family day care workers was represented as an essential component of service provision.

I think the first step is educators becoming better ... Educators becoming better at making children's social and emotional learning visible. And that's not just writing a portfolio that describes what you did yesterday. But starting to make much more transparent [connections] that they bring to supporting social and emotional learning to children in their care. (Government representative)

The educator discourse thus allowed government officials and scheme management to position the oversight of workers' activities as essential to ensuring service quality, although such positions were not always accepted as management challenged the relationship between supervision and quality improvement.

How do we assess it [social and emotional learning]? I don't think spot visits are appropriate really. I mean, you don't want to catch people out. You want to catch people doing good things. So I don't know. I must say that the thing that does concern me a little bit in spot visits too and the quality improvement stuff is it's a little bit punitive in nature. So they're always designed to catch you out, as I said, and to me that mitigates against quality improvement. (Scheme manager)

By highlighting the relationships between monitoring and service quality, the 'educator' discourse can be seen to make particular representations of family day care work more visible, such as child learning outcomes, while obscuring others, such as emotional attachment. These findings mirror those of Osgood (2006) who contends that government policy seeks to promote a 'correct reading' that promotes certain discursive truths over others. These 'truths', taken up by scheme management, identify what it means to be a professional family day care worker and how service quality will be assessed. However, the endorsed representation of professionalism runs counter to the beliefs and practices of some family day care practitioners, a tension that Osgood (2006, p. 9) argues 'poses a direct threat to the professional integrity that the practitioner seeks to maintain', a position that is acknowledged by scheme management, above, when they refer to the punitive nature of spot visits and the 'quality improvement stuff'.

The acknowledgement of such tensions in the construction of family day care workers, however, did not provide space for resistance within the 'educator' discourse. For example, peak body management saw that for existing, 'traditional' family day care workers, 'a significant paradigm shift is required from existing processes and skill set to the new approach and the skills that are required for that'. As such, the 'educator' discourse established and represented family day care workers as 'educators' who could achieve the prescribed standards of professionalism by objectively demonstrating service quality. When such representations, however, came into conflict

with workers' lived reality of quality assurance, tensions emerged. The following discussion of the 'It is my job' discourse will examine how the representation of an ideal, neo-liberal family day care worker, made available within the 'educator' discourse, was appropriated and modified by some family day care workers.

'It is my job': professionalising care work

The 'It is my job' discourse was actively taken up by individual workers in an attempt to locate their work within the positions made available by the official 'educator' discourse. As such, family day care workers who took up the 'job' discourse did so to justify their 'educator' activities and reconcile the often contradictory requirements of quality assurance and effective service delivery.

The 'job' discourse focused primarily on the functions of the job rather than the characteristics of the carer, and in particular centred on the new demands created by the pending roll-out of the EYLF, NQF and NQS.

Nobody loves big changes or more rules and more paperwork, but what can you do? ... You've got to embrace it and go, 'Okay, this is part of my job and I have to do it'. It makes us a bit more professional, probably a bit more accountable. But I've always thought that you [we] were accountable and professional. (Educator)

By emphasising their accountability and professionalism, participants who drew on this 'occupational' discourse were able to contrast their position with the innate, informal work described by 'carers' and ascribe to the constructions of expertise and professionalism made available to them by scheme management. As such, neo-liberal constructions of the professional shaped what workers saw as appropriate models of practice and their own work within this (Colley, 2006; Osgood, 2006). For example, one participant stated:

We decided we'd do the Diploma, because I think people have an image of us sitting at home eating doughnuts, talking on the phone with a coffee. (Educator)

Those family day care workers who took up the 'job' discourse were a distinct group of workers compared to those who framed their work within a discourse of 'caring'. Thus, the 'job' discourse enabled these workers to identify with standards of service provision that extended well beyond babysitting, highlighting the professional nature of their work:

I wanted to be the best I could be, I guess, at my job. I want people to know that we don't just babysit, I guess. We're here to educate the child. (Educator)

I thought, 'If I'm going to be a day carer' and like be responsible for the wellbeing of children, 'I wanted to do it the best I knew I could'. So I just wanted to be more than somewhere where kids come and play. (Educator)

Contrary to the 'carer' discourse that will be shown to draw on individualistic, maternal notions of care work, the 'job' discourse used linguistic devices to illustrate a collective understanding of 'the job' and what it entailed for all family day care workers:

It [paperwork] takes up a lot of time when we could be spending more time doing other things, [like] playing with the children. It's all about paperwork. (Educator, emphasis added)

This shared occupational narrative permeated the interviews, where in some cases, participants referred to the collective when answering questions about their own experiences:

Sometimes we get overloaded with it [paperwork]. We're a bit, 'oh, there's another form to read'. (Educator)

We call them [fieldworkers] any time we've got an issue that we want to talk about. (Educator)

The use of pronouns such as 'we' depicted a shared 'job' experienced by all family day care workers. In doing so, this discourse identified with the broader, professional discourse espoused by management. As such, the 'job' discourse established what constituted a good family day care worker within mainstream representations, such as those established and promoted by the 'educator' discourse.

While 'professionalism' was central to the 'job' discourse, workers taking it up often referred to themselves as 'carers' and made use of their experience as mothers to comply with specified service standards and outcomes. As a result, the 'job' discourse was often conflicted and contradictory as workers sought to reconcile their often incompatible positions of 'educators' and 'carers'. As a result, within the 'job' discourse, maternal experience was positioned as the baseline competence for family day care work, a position supported by Jones and Osgood (2007). However, such representations were exposed as flawed when compared with quality assurance standards, such as those positioned as superior within the 'educator' discourse.

P1: I didn't do the diploma. I wish I could have done that in [inaudible], because I didn't realise what I'd done was totally wrong. Although, that's how I was brought up.

P2: But is it wrong?

P3: That's right!

P1: It is now. (Educator)

While participants 2 and 3, above, challenge the legitimacy of professionalisation, participant 1 conflates formal qualifications and service quality, representing those who do not achieve or aspire to such standards as being at risk of practices that are 'totally wrong'.

In taking up the 'job' discourse that sought to reconcile family day care work with the rhetoric espoused by government and scheme management, workers identified with quality assurance standards and the need for organisational compliance. The 'job' discourse, however, highlighted the social construction of the 'work' of family day care and the limits of this construct. The standards of accountability, quality and visibility constructed by the 'educator' discourse were unable to be fully realised. As such, the need to make visible what was previously understood as subjective care work (Bone, 2002) illuminated the incompatibility of the 'educator' and 'carer' positions and the resultant strain on family day care workers. In the following excerpt, a training provider gives an account of what she felt family day care workers were experiencing:

P: Unfortunately a lot of educators have been told that they need to document. So they'll have big fat folders for each child. They're keeping documentation for documentation's sake. Whereas what they should be doing, and what they're not being told as much, is to keep the records they need, so that they can program effectively. ... They're [family day care workers] very scared. And they're terrified. 'If we don't get this right ...'

I: Lose [their job?].

P: Well, but worse than that, they're absolutely convinced that they're going to be fined on the spot. So when they're going against the regulations, like if somebody doesn't have the program up [on display], that's X number of units of penalty. They don't understand that there's a whole system in place before it gets to penalty time. ... And there is some particular service that's actually putting together a few A4 pages of all the things an educator can do wrong and the penalty they could be charged. Now they've put that out because the coordination unit believes that that's [how it is]. But in actual fact, it's not like that at all. (Educator)

As Noblet and colleagues (2006) note, managerialist reform often involves radical structural, procedural and cultural change that have a human cost for employees. This is particularly the case here where the introduction of the NQF represents a seismic shift in the conceptualisation of family day care, with the implications borne by individual, isolated front-line staff. Further, the literature indicates that managerialist reforms are felt most keenly by workers whose roles involve emotional labour (Bone, 2002). For the early childhood sector, the intensification of work expected as a result of the roll-out of the NQF will be experienced most keenly by family day care workers who work alone in their own homes. Such isolation renders family day care workers fundamentally different from centre-based staff as family day care workers confront such work intensification with limited scope for collegial interaction and few opportunities for 'relief from' or 'assistance with' the demands of the job.

In her classic studies of burnout in the helping professions, Maslach (1976; Maslach & Pines, 1977) highlighted several strategies workers used to limit the emotional toll of their work. Two of these five strategies include making sharp distinctions between the job and personal life and

objectifying situations by recasting them in more intellectual, less personal terms. Such techniques mirror those proposed within the 'educators' discourse and taken up within the 'job' discourse. However, the remaining three techniques of using abstract labels to depersonalise the relationship with clients, withdrawing from the situation, and seeking support from others are not available to family day care providers as they go about their daily practice. While fieldworkers and/or other workers are called on for support, this support is unable to be provided in 'real time' when the emotional labour occurs. In light of these tensions, family day care management employing the 'educator' discourse will need to be especially aware of the inherent challenges of managerialist reform and provide adequate support for workers who aspire to the notion of a professional 'educator' as well as those who reject this discourse.

'I am a carer': the maternal nature of providing care

The third discourse was actively taken up by workers rejecting the positioning of family day care workers as 'educators'. In almost all interviews and focus groups with family day care workers, participants referred to themselves as 'carers' and the work they did as 'childcare', 'looking after kids', or 'minding kids'. Such labels downplayed the 'profession' and instead emphasised the less formal nature of family day care. For example, one focus group participant stated: 'We get paid to mind kids in our home'.

The 'carer' discourse represented a 'traditional' understanding of family day care prior to the introduction of the EYLF and NQF. As the chief executive officer of a family day care scheme sponsor organisation stated, 'when you talk about family day care, people simply talk about the caring of a child, the babysitting concept'. Such references to 'babysitting' and 'childminding' highlight the value of nurturing as an essential component of child development, and did not in any way acknowledge workers' roles as 'educators'.

The end result is, well to me, is having a well-adjusted child ready for school ... And by well adjusted, I don't mean can count to 20 [inaudible, but can] speak to people and hold their head up and are ready for school and ready to go and that sort of thing. (Educator)

Making sure they're happy, well adjusted, comfortable in society. That's basically what I'm always looking [to achieve]. (Educator)

Of particular relevance to the 'carer' discourse was the worker's previous experience of childminding, particularly of mothering, which reflected an 'attachment pedagogy' (Moss, 2006b) where workers modelled the dyadic mother-child relationship. 'Carers' often made reference to their own upbringing and parental experience as valid sources of knowledge, for example, stating that 'my mum used to say ...' and 'we've all been mothers'. Others said:

So unless you've had kids and you've got a bit of experience, you wouldn't expect them [children] to do it [disobey an instruction]. So it must be harder for some younger carers.

I feel quite confident. Yeah. I think I get it from being a wife and being a mum. I think I've got enough experience.

In this discourse, parental knowledge was legitimised and prioritised over formal training and participants sought informal information exchange as opposed to specific instruction.

Sometimes I think I know more than the field workers. So ... And I wouldn't be asking them for their advice. I would be asking another carer.

Rather, the 'carer' discourse established that 'the ones without kids need training'. By framing their work in terms of their maternal experiences, family day care workers who drew on the 'carer' discourse emphasised the natural nature of caring work. This discourse allowed for the experience of the individual carer to be highlighted, and did not draw on broader notions of solidarity or professionalism among family day care workers. When reference was made to other family day care workers, the discourse relied on the shared experience of motherhood – differentiating such carers from those who lacked maternal life experience. Within this individualised, personal discourse, family day care was framed as a form of surrogate mothering. For example, participants

often referred to the children in their care as their own and formed enduring relationships that extended well beyond the provision of childcare to intergenerational caring relationships.

I think making sure the kid's happy. Making sure they're happy. That they're happy to go to you. Like, I look after three children and I used to look after their dad, and their dad's sister. So they come an hour's drive for me to look after them.

These enduring, maternal bonds conflicted with the 'job' discourse and the 'educator' discourse that represented workers as service providers offering detached, standardised care.

I've got some children that were brought into DHS [the Department of Human Services] and they asked me and I'm like, 'well, they're my kids,' and I was told I was very unprofessional ... They live eighty hours out of every week minimum at my house. I'll call them my kids.

In addition to challenging the construction of a detached 'educator', the 'carer' discourse challenged the 'educator' discourse's representation of the objective, standardised and independently verifiable nature of service quality, with 'carers' stating, 'we work the way we work'. In doing so, workers who took up the 'carer' discourse challenged the need for supervision from management, as the following excerpt from a focus group discussion exemplifies:

P1: If they make us happy the kids are happy.

I: Exactly. And how can ...

P1: How can they make us happy?

P2: Leave us alone!

(Laughter)

By framing the managerial operations of scheme staff as unnecessary and obstructionist, the 'carer' discourse challenged what the 'educator' and 'jobs' discourses portrayed as a competent family day care worker.

Some people who are highly trained, high skilled may not be connecting with the children as well as some of the less qualified [educators]. But [they are] connecting at a very deep level and intuitively doing this with those children [and thus they] ... have a greater impact than someone else. (Educator)

Rather than objective, reportable 'learning' outcomes, the 'I'm a carer' discourse highlighted the negative side of quality assurance, such as risk-aversion and a diversion of attention away from familial relationships and on to work practices.

I just don't think it's enough, it's too structured. Just for some children, there's not enough explanation and not enough risk challenges for them to help them to explore ... It's all regulations, and that's just litigation. (Educator)

I'm near the end my career now and I go to some of the meetings [training programs] now and I think, 'I'm out of the loop here', because it's all about the carer's job and the time she works and the child that comes into care and that's her focus whereas I tend to focus on the family. (Educator)

By prioritising childhood freedom and focusing on the family, the 'carer' discourse can be linked to what has been described as a 'Nordic' approach to early learning where children are 'free from excessive adult control, over supervision and interference' (Wagner, 2006, p. 293). This differs from the 'westernised' approach to early childhood education where structure and supervision are essential and curriculum goals are prioritised (Ishimine et al, 2009). However, it must be noted that the 'Nordic' and 'western' positions are legitimised only when they are enshrined in legislation and management practice. As such, 'Nordic' expressions of family and freedom do not sit comfortably within the 'western' system. In addition, by rejecting mainstream Australian early childhood education values, the 'carer' discourse makes the task of recognising the work of women in family day care more difficult as its focus on the maternal nature of the work means that 'little or no education is necessary' (Moss, 2006b, p. 34). As a result, those workers who appropriate the 'carer' discourse will be further marginalised and rendered as 'obsolete' within the context of a

compulsory managerial take-up of the EYLF and NQF, as has been outlined in the 'educator' discourse above.

Conclusions

The three discourses uncover and contribute to the tensions and divisions that exist between family day care workers' and management's and government's assumptions regarding family day care workers' role as 'educators' and/or 'carers'. However, by describing these three discourses, we are not suggesting that one discourse is morally or practically superior to another. While we have observed the take-up of the 'educator' and 'job' discourses by family day care management and workers, respectively, we do not suggest that an educational approach is without merit. For example, it is well understood that carers who have completed qualifications provide better quality care (Fukking & Lont, 2007). Further, by locating family day care workers within the purview of the NQF, children in family day care settings are more likely to be exposed to programs and experiences purported to have a positive impact on their social and emotional wellbeing and learning.

What we do note about our findings is that they mirror Sofou and Tsafos's (2010) analysis of the impact of curriculum documents in the Greek context, where they found that less experienced early childhood workers were more likely to view curriculum documents as indispensable, whereas more experienced workers sometimes did not refer to the documents at all. While curriculum frameworks have the power to 'lift professional standards to a more sophisticated level' (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007, p. 13) there is no evidence that such documents can make practitioners practice in a more 'professional' manner or identify more strongly as 'educators' (Ortlipp et al, 2011). To achieve such an ideological shift, Ortlipp and colleagues (2011) suggest that the discourse of professionalism needs to be taken up by 'professional' workers themselves. While the experienced workers who took up the 'carer' discourse may not contribute to this shift, the scheme management's decision to only recruit workers who identify with the 'educator' discourse may hasten this transition.

Finally, while the term 'educator' in the context of the EYLF places early childhood pedagogy within an 'ethic of care' (Moss, 2006a), in this study, worker, management and government take-up of the 'job' and 'educator' discourses served to reorient, essentialise and simplify what it meant to be a family day care worker. Further, the take-up of discourses previously foreign to family day care produce and reproduce tensions between 'women's work' and 'masculine professionalism' that undermine the sector's attempts to increase their status and recognition, and may instead increase worker burnout and staff turnover (Noblet et al, 2006). Many of these tensions stem from family day care's roots in the attachment pedagogy described by Moss (2006b); a pedagogy that appeals to parents who use family day care services and the workers who have been in the industry over the long-term.

As quality assurance standards seeks to homogenise the evaluation of service quality in centre-based and family day care, the possible ways of describing family day care service quality are reduced. Given the already marginalised position of family day care within early years discourse (Lyons, 2012), it is likely that the particularities of family day care, such as childhood freedom, an authentic home environment and connection with community (Hand, 2005) may be lost. Detached, observable, measurable service quality overrides the quality of human experience. As Woodrow (2008, p. 275) notes in her examination of Australian discourses of professionalism in early childhood education, 'there is sufficient evidence to raise concern about which possible identities and professional discourses might be nourished, sustained and privileged in such environments and which might be at risk through these policy trajectories and interventions'. Without considered effort to acknowledge and value the current skills and experience of the family day care workforce, the EYLF and NQF may, without intention, act to further minimise the worth and place of family day care. To conclude, we reiterate Osgood's (2006, p. 6) concern that:

The hegemonic government professionalism discourse effectively silences alternative debates about what it means to be professional, how professionalism might look and the dangers of unreflexively accepting and adhering to an externally imposed normalised construction of

professionalism: in essence, alternative counter-discourses become pathologised and marginalised.

For Australian family day care workers, it appears as though this process has already begun.

Note

- [1] While the EYLF terminology uses 'educators' we have deliberately used the term family day care 'worker' in this study to avoid the politicised and contested nature of this term within the professionalisation agenda (Woodrow, 2008).

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