
W(H)ither the Early Childhood Teacher: tensions for early childhood professional identity between the policy landscape and the politics of teacher regulation

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ABSTRACT Over the last decade teachers, teachers' work and teacher education across all domains of education have been subject to increasing surveillance and regulation. Recent developments in the Australian regulatory context are signalling the emergence of a strengthening bifurcation between prior-to-school and schooling contexts that is forcing a narrowing construction of 'teaching' as work that is only undertaken in schooling contexts. This trend seems likely to have serious implications for the professional identity, status and professional preparation of early childhood teachers and the potential to reposition early childhood contexts as marginalised and non-pedagogical spaces. This article traces some recent developments in teacher regulation and locates an analysis of possible implications for the field of early childhood against a backdrop of emerging trends in the early childhood policy landscape. The emerging tensions invite questions about the potential gains and losses should the current trends become entrenched. The article concludes with a consideration of naming and framing as elements of possible action.

Introduction

Whilst international definitions of 'early childhood' generally locate the field as being concerned with the care and education of children between birth and eight years, across a range of contexts (Sawyer, 2000; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001), who and what constitutes an 'early childhood professional' has frequently been contested ground in Australia and internationally. The historical antecedents of the field have meant that policy and practice has been informed by diverse knowledge bases that include those in the health, education and welfare arenas. Such eclecticism has undoubtedly contributed to ambiguity in professional identity for the early childhood professional, although other factors such as training structures and industrial conditions also contribute to making aspects of professional identity problematic. In the Australian context, the term teaching has been widely employed to describe the work undertaken by university-qualified professionals working with pedagogical intent in a wide range of early childhood contexts. These include early years classrooms, child and family services in the community, and in contexts known as childcare settings. However, with the increasing regulation of teachers and teacher preparation, there is evidence of a trend towards a strengthening bifurcation between prior-to-school and schooling contexts that is forcing a narrowing construction of 'teaching' as work that is only undertaken in schooling contexts. Such a trend invites a number of questions. If this trend has the potential to redesignate prior-to-school settings as a 'non-pedagogical' space, what is at stake? Is there a risk of reinscribing traditional and outdated roles for those who work with young children? How might these limit or enhance the visions and

imagination of what early childhood as a social and political institution might contribute and achieve for young children as citizens, for advancing democratic principles and for the community more broadly (Dahlberg et al, 1999)? If 'teaching' is designated only as pedagogical action in school contexts, how might this affect emerging policy discourses concerning the potential role of schools as community hubs and the seamless provision of services for children and families? Will it also limit the opportunity for early childhood curriculum approaches to exert an upward influence on schools (Choi, 2002)?

This article begins to take up the challenge offered by provocative questions such as those suggested above by exploring possible implications of some recent developments in the accreditation of teachers and teacher education. The article begins with a thumbnail sketch of the Australian context and proceeds to describe some recent developments in teacher regulation nationally and in some Australian states. It then moves on to provide a reading of some possible implications of perceived emerging trends, particularly in relation to how the technologies of teacher registration and teacher education accreditation may be contributing to a narrowing of the policy/political and pedagogical space for the early childhood teacher. The analysis is undertaken in the context of current and emerging policy trends, nationally and internationally. By raising these issues, the intention is to provoke dialogue about potential gains and losses inherent in the current situation and inform thinking about possible future action.

The Australian Context

In Australia, those university-qualified professionals who work with a dual focus on the care and education dimensions of young children's development and learning in both school and non-school contexts are typically referred to as early childhood teachers. They may work in a variety of contexts that include classrooms in schools, pre-school (both within schools and independently operated by community organisations) and childcare centres (variously operated by independent and community organisations as well as by private for-profit enterprises and corporate chains). However, requirements vary across states and territories in relation to the qualifications of people working in early childhood programs. School-based programs almost always require teacher qualifications, as do most pre-school programs, whilst only in some states are teacher qualifications required in childcare settings. In recent years, a strengthening pedagogical discourse and identity has framed early childhood professionals' work in both prior-to-school and school settings, particularly as curriculum frameworks have emerged to support, define and in some cases regulate early childhood teacher's work in non-school settings (Woodrow & Brennan, 2000; Grieshaber, 2000a). Along side these, professional resources such as the Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia [ECA], 2006) and professional standards (Maloney & Barblett, 2000) continue to privilege and promote professional values associated with engagement and partnership with families, care and nurturance, children's citizenship and holistic concerns for children's well-being, contributing to a distinctiveness in early childhood discourse when compared to schooling.

Early childhood teacher education, like teacher education for primary and secondary schools, is undertaken by universities. Typically these degree courses incorporate curriculum content and professional experience appropriate to working pedagogically with children aged 0-8, or 3-8 years across a range of settings that include school, pre-school and childcare (Watson, 2006). Recent research identified some commonality to degree programs across the nation, with distinctive and/or specialist content core areas most commonly relating to understanding children, knowledge of communities, families and children, health, leadership and management in addition to curriculum studies and pedagogical knowledge across the age range (Watson, 2006).

Regulating Teaching and Teacher Education – pushing early childhood teaching to the margins?

In Australia, as in many OECD countries, education has experienced successive waves of reform, strongly influenced by neo-liberal discourses. One of the great ironies to emerge from neo-liberalism in practice is the deceptiveness of the defining rhetoric around 'smaller' government, deregulation and flexibility. In fact, across many areas, the reverse appears to occur. Over the last

decade the early childhood curriculum has become increasingly prescribed and centralised, and in many cases linked overtly to the school curriculum and through this to vocational outcomes, teachers' work in the schooling sector has become increasingly (ac)countable, and development of standards and compliance regimes have proliferated to encroach significantly on teacher identity and autonomy (Sachs, 1999, 2003; Woodrow & Brennan, 2000; Grieshaber, 2000a). Early childhood teachers have experienced these trends primarily through codification of the curriculum (Woodrow & Brennan, 2000; Greishaber, 2000a) and through the mechanism of accreditation (Grieshaber, 2000b).

Recently, the regulatory gaze on teachers, teachers' work and teacher preparation has intensified significantly in Australia as mechanisms through which compliance, registration and regulation can be ascertained and managed have been established or reviewed. This has given rise to new regulatory bodies at both state level (New South Wales Institute of Teachers) and national level (Teaching Australia) and the refocusing and strengthening of others (e.g. Queensland College of Teachers), ostensibly in the service of supporting teaching and 'rais(ing) the status, quality and professionalism of teachers' (Teaching Australia, 2007).

However, the institutional gaze has primarily been on the schooling sector and the work of teachers of children at and beyond compulsory school commencement age. For example, both the national body, Teaching Australia, and the newly established New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSWIT) have no mandate and had little interest in either supporting or regulating early childhood teachers outside of schooling, despite vigorous encouragement from the early childhood sector to do so. In the state of Queensland, the Queensland College of Teachers (formerly the Board of Teacher Registration) has been making moves to deny full registration to early childhood teachers they have previously registered if these teachers are working in non-school contexts and have no recent experience in school settings. Interestingly, the home page of the Queensland College of Teachers claims, 'the College was established by the *Education (Queensland College of Teachers) Act 2005*, as an independent professional body representing *all* members of the Queensland teaching profession' (June 2007; emphasis added). However, by referring only to school settings in its statement on professional standards and its proposed action in denying registration to early childhood teachers working outside schools, the College is clearly not recognising early childhood teachers working in childcare, pre-school and kindergartens in settings which are not attached to schools.

Thus, early childhood teachers are increasingly finding themselves excluded from the institutional arenas and discourses that 'register' 'accredit' and recognise teachers and courses for 'teachers'.

Whilst these developments leave early childhood teachers working in early childhood contexts other than formal schooling less subject to regulation and control than their peers in school settings, such 'freedom' might come at a cost. This might include less public visibility and diminishing public acknowledgement of the pedagogical work undertaken by early childhood teachers in non-school contexts, and decreasing recognition, both within the peer community of teachers, and more broadly in public space, of the contribution an early childhood focused pedagogy might make to teaching in the early years of school (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007). There are also issues of access to resources developed (e.g. professional development programs) by the regulatory organisations, and inclusion in public education programs promoting the status of teachers. Such moves cast adrift from the mainstream those early childhood professionals working as teachers outside of school settings, and may contribute to alienating or denying the place of educational discourses in many early childhood contexts.

Regulating Teacher Education

In Australia, university teacher education has now become the new focus for surveillance and control in the education landscape, again at both a national and state level, with some potentially serious implications for early childhood teacher education.

Although teacher education is no stranger to review, few of the 99 reports, reviews or inquiries into teacher education in Australia since 1979 (Hartsuyker, 2007) have paid any particular attention to the cross-sectoral complexities associated with early childhood teacher education. One

review focused on the status of teaching, *A Class Act* (Crowley, 1998), acknowledged the low status of early childhood teaching, which according to submissions received, could at least in part be attributed to the feminised nature of the sector and the lack of community valuing of young children. Given the current trends on which this article reports, one might wonder if little has changed in a decade for the status of early childhood.

Accrediting of teacher education courses is a new development for Australia, as universities have traditionally self-accredited their courses, although there has been varying degrees of oversight of teacher education and involvement in course development by state education departments through the mechanism of employment guidelines, 'approvals' and course advisory structures. Whilst processes for national approval are yet to be confirmed, there is no evidence that the national body that has carriage of the accreditation initiative has any interest in settings outside of school. In a recent consultation paper on a proposed national accreditation system for teacher preparation programs, Teaching Australia raised the issue of whether a national system should take account of 'specialised areas of teaching or stages of schooling (such as early childhood, primary, middle years, secondary)' (Teaching Australia, 2006), but its interest is confined only to the schooling sector.

The case of the NSW Institute of Teachers becomes interesting both in relation to early childhood concerns specifically, and its role in course accreditation. Whilst the NSWIT's strongest function is the accreditation of teachers, and not the accreditation of courses, it has released draft content guidelines for subject content to assist universities to design 'graduate and undergraduate initial teacher education programs to meet the demands of relevant discipline knowledge and associated approaches to teaching NSW syllabuses' (NSWIT, 2006) in order that graduates will meet the Professional Standards developed by the NSWIT. These guidelines make no reference to early childhood specifically. The depth and breadth of requirements in relation to school contexts suggest little room in courses for other content that might support the knowledge building and dispositions required for early childhood teachers working across the 0-8 age range.

The developments described here suggest an emerging pattern across the nation of early childhood teachers and related teacher education courses being marginalised or excluded from mainstream consideration in the strengthening policy discourses around teacher accreditation.

In recent months, however, there has been a slight movement by some state authorities to reconsider the case of early childhood. For example, the NSWIT has decided to host a forum to explore 'issues related to prevailing philosophies, current research, legislation issues, structure of programs of initial teacher education ... with a view to facilitating the process of approval of Early Childhood Programs' (Lee, 2007). This development indicates a shift from the original position of non-engagement with early childhood concerns and suggests that there may be some room for movement within the recently released framework of mandatory content areas and specific standards which are primarily focused on narrowly defined discipline content and school-focused curriculum and pedagogical knowledge (NSWIT, 2006).

As they currently stand, compliance with these draft guidelines potentially excludes an early childhood focus across the 0-8 age range and makes it extremely difficult for universities to meet dual accreditation requirements with the NSW Department of Community Services for teachers in prior-to-school settings and NSWIT for school settings. Recent communication with the Queensland College of Teachers suggests that this organisation may also now consider issues of 'equivalence' to school teaching experience for the purposes of early childhood teacher registration, but the mechanism for undertaking this is so far unclear (personal communication, 2007).

Possible Implications for the Early Childhood Field

Whilst small windows of opportunity are opening for early childhood to enter the mainstream debate in the state institutions for teacher accreditation and course recognition, some general trends are clear in the (dis)location of early childhood teachers. These trends of exclusion reflect a narrowing definition of 'teacher' as one who works only with classes of children in school settings, with a potential impact of pushing early childhood teaching to the margins of legitimacy as teachers, and creating ambiguity around definitions of early childhood outside of school contexts as a pedagogical space. Historically, when early childhood professionals have been positioned outside

of teacher discourses, wage parity with school teachers has been difficult to achieve (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2000; Burton & Lyons, 2000). There is evidence of the consequences of reduced status, conditions and attractiveness of working in prior-to-school contexts in NSW in the extreme shortage of early childhood qualified teachers for the prior-to-school sector (Warrilow et al, 2002).

In turn, shortages of qualified staff contribute to leaving the field vulnerable to pressures to lower the requirements for university-qualified early childhood teachers in non-school settings such as childcare and pre-schools. For example, there are strong vested interests, particularly, although not exclusively, in the private and corporate sector in keeping labour costs low and hence minimising the educational dimension of prior-to-school services. Excluding teachers employed in these settings from processes of teacher accreditation, and early childhood courses from review by teacher education accreditation authorities, might well play into the hands of these interests. One effect is to place pressure on university programs to divide their course offerings into separate degrees for professional preparation for school and non-school settings. Whilst the desirability of this is open to debate, data collected in research with students at one NSW university demonstrates a strong student preference for integrated degrees catering for career opportunities across the early childhood sector (Ashton & Elliott, 2006). The discipline content knowledge requirements and the tight focus on this and curriculum, syllabus and school pedagogical issues in the draft content requirements for NSW teacher education courses also pressures early childhood programs to abandon or reduce studies in areas such as the sociology of childhood, communities, families, leadership and collaborative partnerships. Arguably, such trends potentially rob the schooling sector of graduates with strong social and community knowledge and the potential to positively influence pedagogical approaches in schooling at a time when there are international trends to expand the role of school in the community, particularly in relation to outreach programs for young children and families (Petrie, 2005).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is widespread concern that the distinctive focus of early childhood teacher education programs is at risk in these conditions. A reading of the literature, and overviews of courses and course pathways, suggests that approaches to curriculum that are child-responsive, involve active learning investigations, shared goals, intentional teaching, holistic concerns for the child and their learning and a perspective on continuity of learning, in addition to a strong child, family and community focus are distinguishing features of such programs (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2003; Watson, 2006; Hard & O'Gorman, 2007).

These Australian trends contrast with some recent international developments in teacher education. For example, recent reforms in Sweden have resulted in all teaching degree qualifications being integrated into one degree with opportunity for specialisation within a uniform framework (Moss, 2004). In the Swedish experience, the emphasis on play, children's natural learning strategies and their holistic development typical of an early childhood focus has been maintained and a surprising consequence has been an 'upward integration' in which early childhood philosophy and pedagogy is being seen to influence school practices (Choi, 2002). Here the focus has shifted from teacher's teaching to children's learning, an outcome consistent with a policy vision of 'lifelong learning' for the Swedish community (Choi, 2002) and a useful example of early childhood knowledge discourses being influential in school contexts.

These findings resonate, at least partially, with some Australian studies of early childhood teachers in primary schools in which 'fundamental differences in the ways that primary teachers and preschool (early childhood) teachers conceptualise teaching and learning' were discerned (Sawyer, 2000). Despite the 'different languages, landscape and cultures' reported by early childhood teachers, the studies found that the discourses associated with early childhood education were resilient for teachers in negotiating their experiences in schools and did not suggest that early childhood professional preparation was inadequate for teaching in school settings (Britt & Sumsion, 2003). In Britt & Sumsion's study, the researchers conceptualised the space inhabited by early childhood teachers in school settings as a kind of 'borderlands' where transformation of both countries (early childhood and primary discourses) might both overlap and intersect and be transformed in realising new possibilities for early years education (Britt & Sumsion, 2003). This complements a theme taken up recently by Hard & O'Gorman (2007), who posits the recent major

early childhood reform in the state of Queensland involving a new early years curriculum and preparatory year as a possible site of leadership and influence for early childhood teachers.

Emerging Trends in the Policy Landscape

Internationally and in Australia trends are emerging to promote and consolidate the importance of the early childhood years, and in some contexts interface early years provision with schooling. These emergent trends have been influenced by and reflect the important work undertaken within the OECD and the Starting Strong project (OECD, 2001, 2006) and the weight of evidence from brain research and more recently the work of economists (e.g. Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003).

Examples of recent program initiatives include government funding of supported playgroups staffed by early childhood professionals as a strategy to facilitate children's transition to school, and numerous early literacy programs located in libraries and community agencies. In the states of Queensland and Western Australia, traditional sessional pre-school for children in the year before compulsory schooling has been relocated in the school context and, in the case of Queensland, accompanied by the development of an innovative play-based early years curriculum, and there is increasing policy interest in developing schools as sites for community capacity building and support, particularly in relation to young children and their families.

Such initiatives, together with increasing evidence of the efficacy of high-quality childcare in effecting positive and sustained educational and learning outcomes for children considered to be 'at risk', and strengthening arguments for universal provision of a pre-school year, foreshadow a place for specialised early years educators with strong pedagogical knowledge and skills, together with highly effective communication and collaboration skills and a community orientation. Reviewing the Queensland early years curriculum initiative, Hard & O'Gorman (2007) argue that this change in early years provision provides an opportunity for leadership from the field of early childhood to influence the early years curriculum in school contexts. Yet despite these trends, professional pedagogical work in the years before the formal commencement of school continues to be undervalued and under-rewarded.

When the trends to exclude early childhood teachers from mainstream teacher institutions are read against emerging policy directions, a critical tension emerges as contradictory forces become evident. On the one hand, there is an emerging emphasis on quality programs in early childhood, integrated service provision (Department of Education and Children's Services [DECS], 2005; OECD, 2006; Council of Australian Governments, 2006), an extended role for schools (Petrie, 2005), schools as community hubs (Blue Mountains Stronger Families Planning Group Strategic Plan, 2007) and program initiatives designed to facilitate children's transition to school in the year before school. A place for specialist early childhood teachers with knowledge of children, families and communities as well as curriculum and pedagogy across the school/non-school divide is strongly implicated in such policy and practice directions. However, a counter-flow associated with the increasing regulation of teachers' work and teacher accreditation and the activities associated with teacher registration are working to exclude these teachers from official recognition when their employment is outside of schools. Additionally, trends evident in the prescription of content within initial teacher education to relegate the usefulness of distinctive early childhood teacher professional knowledge only to the prior-to-school sector seem both ill founded and contradictory to emerging national and international policy interests and directions in emphasising continuity of children's learning experience, especially as it impacts on children's transition to school and school success (Sawyer, 2000; Dockett & Perry 2001; Petriwskyj et al, 2005).

These trends and counter-flows are suggestive of significant challenges for the field in negotiating, articulating and promoting early childhood professional identities that are relevant within and across the various domains of a rapidly changing policy landscape.

Early Childhood Professional Identity

In the fragmented policy landscape that characterises early childhood in Australia, professionals working with young children and families in the prior-to-school sector have consistently struggled to gain wider recognition of the educational dimension of their work. Unlike some other contexts,

such as some Scandinavian countries where the notion of the social pedagogue (Oberhuemer, 2005) seems to have successfully realised the interdependence of care and education in work with young children, a persistent care/education dichotomy pervades much of the early childhood discourse in Australia. The impact of this distinction was most evident in a salary pay claim before the Queensland Industrial Relations Tribunal where a 1996 decision not to award university-trained professionals working in long day care salary parity with teachers in other settings (school and kindergarten) was based on a perception that practitioners in these settings were 'only' providing 'developmental' programs, supposedly requiring of less skill (Burton & Lyons, 2000, p. 73). It would seem that adopting a developmental lens reinforced the work as low-status, 'caring' work. The impact of these poorer working conditions is also reflected in the ongoing shortage of early childhood teachers in the prior-to-school sector. Research with commencing early childhood university students indicates that their preferred career trajectories in the early years of school (Ashton & Elliott, 2006) are strongly influenced by pay and conditions. Despite significant changes in both the Australian policy context and the conceptual and theoretical framings of early childhood professional practice, and some evident trends of shifts away from the dominance of developmentalism, the artificial divides remains and continues to reinforce early childhood work in the prior-to-school sector as peripheral and low status, non-educational and 'un-teacherly'.

Whilst a combination of structural/institutional issues and shifts in policy trends make understanding early childhood professional work only as pedagogical work problematic, it could be argued that the nomenclature of 'teacher' has played an important role in emphasising the professional status of early childhood work, supporting improvement in wages and conditions and defining early childhood settings as education contexts in the Australian context. However, internationally there is considerable diversity in how the work of early childhood professionals is represented through language.

Drawing on Alexander (2000), Oberhuemer (2005) encourages the use of the term 'early childhood pedagogue' rather than teacher as potentially useful in communicating both the act and the discourse associated with professional behaviours in early childhood and one which gestures towards the cultural, historical and socio-political embeddedness of such conceptualisations. Moss (2004) too, encourages the take-up of the conceptual framings associated with the European term pedagogue as an inclusive construct for pedagogical work across ages ranges; work that 'is both relational and holistic'. As he explains, 'the pedagogue sets out to address the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity' (Moss & Petrie, 2002). The use of such terminology might contribute to releasing care work from its maternal bonds, which have undoubtedly constrained the public discourses around early childhood. The impact of caring discourses in early childhood, how these position the profession in feminine discourses of domesticity and nurturance, and their implications for strong professional identity have been well rehearsed (Petrie, 1992; Moyles, 2001; Grieshaber, 2001; Woodrow, 2003).

Moving Forward – naming and framing

This article has attempted to expose some critical tensions in relation to the positioning of early childhood in the politics of teacher regulation and read these against emergent policy trends in the provision of early childhood services. Such exposition involves the author in adopting a position of critique. However, as Singh et al (2006) recently reminded education policy analysts, critique is of limited use in progressing agendas: 'reproducing bad sense in the name of critique serves to replicate these issues, interests and definitions and thereby increase their share of the prevailing governing outlook ... this is a danger, but surely untangling the dominant discourse and searching for hidden and alternate meanings is a good place to start'. Working as part of the project 'Robust Hope', involving a research collective concerned to investigate ways to imagine, engage with and enact utopian possibilities in the face of the structural pressures of neo-liberalism, Singh identifies five interdependent strategies that have emerged in the Robust Hope project as potentially useful (Singh et al, 2006). These strategies are 'framing', 'engaging', 'assessing', 'communicating' and 'reflecting self-critically'. All strategies are fundamentally connected to the idea of undertaking real-world research that goes beyond critique and identifying problems to working in ways that can inform policy action.

The first strategy, framing, is potentially an important one to deploy for the early childhood field, particularly in any project of repositioning, which emerges as a significant challenge for addressing some of the issues identified in this article. Describing frameworks as 'mental structures that shape the way we see the world', Lakoff (2006, p. xv) argues that frames are fundamentally important to how meaning is made and what is seen as common sense. To reframe is to change the way we and the public make meaning of policy, actions and events and thus to change what counts as common sense. Since language is the way we know and respond to frames, new language is required for new frames. Researchers have found that the 'prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest frames lies at the heart of successful policy advocacy' (Bales, 2005, p. 2).

The historical framings of early childhood education have shown remarkable resilience over a sustained period and through periods of significant social change. Given the changing circumstances, shifting the frames might be an important strategy to repositioning policy discourses about this provision in a project of reclaiming and emphasising early childhood education as an important pedagogical space.

Extensive research undertaken by the Frameworks Institute in the USA provides a number of insights into dominant frames in relation to early childhood provision and how these impact on the capacity for incursions on the status quo. In particular, understandings of children's development as a 'black box' and images of the child as a 'blank slate', 'clay to be moulded' or a 'plant to be nurtured' predominate in the frames people use to make sense of early childhood and early childhood provision (Bales, 2005). Additionally, children's existence is mostly understood in terms of the (nuclear) family domain. The influence of the physical environment, the child as active agent, and the children in interaction with the community and building relationships outside the home as well as social and emotional growth are poorly understood and minimised. To inform policy advocacy for stronger educational provision in the early years, the research indicates the efficacy of a change in language: 'the public, child development experts and community stakeholders actually share similar beliefs about what children need to grow and develop. The language is the problem, not the core recommendations' (Bales, 2005, p. 18). At its most simplistic level, research suggests that terms such as day care and childcare need to disappear from our language and be replaced by consistent reference to terms such as early learning and early childhood education (Lakoff & Grady, 1998), as childcare evokes the metaphor of 'child storage' (Lakoff & Grady, 1998, p. 10) and the early learning frame is a more stable foundation from which to argue that the provider is a teacher who requires training. Although this has been recognised for some time, the research suggests that framing communication in terms which promote values of community exchange, futures, stewardship and prosperity for the society might help provide a mechanism for this to be heard at policy and community levels (Frameworks Institute, 2005). These values are consistent with the important theoretical and policy work undertaken in repositioning early childhood in Europe by activists such as Dahlberg & Moss (2005). These findings might also usefully inform the conceptualisation, data analysis and framing of findings of an important nine-country international study exploring early childhood professionalism across social contexts which is currently under way under the auspices of the European Early Childhood Research Association. Given the power of the dominant discourses, projects of framing and reframing are significant and challenging undertakings to mobilise, but, under the weight of evidence, necessary to moving dialogue forward on these important issues pertaining to the early childhood education project. Such mobilisation also requires highly effective strategies of communication and an understanding of real-world contexts and actions, informed by research.

Conclusions

Judyth Sachs (2003) suggests that the concept and practice of professionalism is a 'site of struggle' and that to 'seek a fixed position is futile: professionalism has always been a changing concept' (p. 6). Early childhood professional identity is very much a 'work-in-progress' – vulnerable, ambiguous, and buffeted by competing policy discourses. This article has drawn on recent developments in Australia relating to teacher accreditation to suggest that there is a strengthening policy trend that is marginalising early childhood teachers by relegating early childhood teaching outside the mainstream. In addition to the risks this might pose in relation to issues of professional

identity and status, issues emerge in relation to other policy discourses that would suggest a strengthening place for early childhood pedagogy and greater fluidity in pedagogical discourse across the school/non-school divide. There is a case that the current politics of teacher and teacher education regulation reduce the public space for such activist energy and new forms of teacher education. One possible resource for (re)claiming that space is through a consideration of the nomenclature and frames that surround early childhood professional work.

There is a clear need for a research agenda exploring issues of professional roles and identity in order to provide evidence for interrupting trends that diminish participation, and recognition of opportunities for leadership in exciting new developments in the international early childhood landscape. There seems to be a strong case for engagement with the politics of teacher education regulation and resistance to the teacher policy discourses to enable recognition of the contribution early childhood teachers might bring to young children's learning across the age range.

For early childhood teachers, the current political context offers many challenges and opportunities for struggle. However, paraphrasing Sachs (1999), it is better to find the right questions than answers to the wrong questions.

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