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Article

Contesting early childhood professional identities: A cross-national discussion

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Abstract

In this collective article, the authors explore constructions of early childhood practitioners and how they disconnect and reconnect in a global neo-liberal education policy context. The contributions to the conversation provide windows into shifting professional identities across five national contexts: New Zealand, the USA, Ireland, Australia and Denmark. The authors ask who benefits from the notion of distinct professional identities, linked to early childhood education as locally and culturally embedded practice. They conceptualize teachers' shifting subjectivities, drawing on Kristeva's philosophical conception of identity as constantly in construction, open and evolving. Arguments for the urgency to counter the global uniformity machine, streamlined curricula, standardized assessment and deprofessionalization are not new. However, the authors wonder whether these arguments are missing something. Does our localized and highly

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contextualized identity construction enable 'divide and rule' politics by global agents such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, World Bank and international corporations? The authors' (preliminary) answer is to build individual and collective professional identities that are grounded in diverse local contexts *and* in a broader transnational professional (political) consciousness and collective voice.

Keywords
Collectivism, identity, neo-liberalism, professionalism

Introduction: engaging in conversation across conceptual and geographical difference

Early childhood professional identities are formed, influenced and (re)shaped by theories, systems and policy agendas. Gendered constructions of early childhood teaching and the effects for remuneration and recognition, quality assurance, student success and nation-building implicate both the field and its teachers.[1] In this article, we conceptualize the lived and sometimes clandestine experiences of teachers through notions of teachers' shifting teacher subjectivities. We draw on Kristeva's philosophical conception of identity as constantly in construction, open and evolving, where subjects are considered as always in process. Deeply implicated by their context, the complex systems, theories – and often highly knowledge-driven agendas – by which they are surrounded, teachers' professional identities are seen as knowingly and unknowingly entangled with their local and global contexts. Framed within this notion, teachers throughout this article are both knowable to themselves and in a certain sense unknowable. Of relevance in the face of increasing global cultural, curricular and assessment multiplicities, for example, this lens helps to conceptualize teachers as Other not only in relation to others, but also in relation to themselves, within the wider uncertainties of the early childhood professional milieu (Arndt, 2016).

On the basis of conceptualizing teachers as also Other – even within themselves and their context – we provide a systemic overview of some aspects of how professional identities shift across five national contexts: New Zealand, the USA, Ireland, Australia and Denmark. We provide debate and questions about what the point is of (and who benefits from) the notion of distinct professional identities, linked to the idea of early childhood education as locally and culturally embedded practices. We address issues arising, specifically in these contexts, of credentialing and its impact on care work, and curriculum expectations, for example, and localized responses and practices. Arguments for the importance of such practices, to counter the global uniformity machine, streamlined curricula, standardized assessment and deprofessionalization, are not new. However, we wonder whether these arguments are missing something. Does our argument enable 'divide and rule' politics played by global agents such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank and international corporations? How can we develop individual and collective professional identities that are grounded in diverse local contexts and in a broader transnational professional (political) consciousness and collective voice?

Framing the conversation (1): multiplicities, systemic challenges and the spectre of deprofessionalization

What does it mean to be(come) *professional* in early childhood? A question that is already and inevitably entangled in complexities, contradictions and struggles for the power of definition becomes

even more challenging when we take a bigger-picture perspective. As we argue in this collaborative piece, processes that constitute professional identities are not only diverse, but also closely connected to the cultural, historical and social contexts in which they take place. Working with young children, their families and diverse communities is an inevitably *local* practice; it is concrete and *takes place* somewhere. Drawing on seminal works such as, for instance, Bloch's (1987) 'Becoming scientific and professional' in early childhood education, early childhood scholars (Urban, 2007, 2008) have discussed and theorized the contextualized characteristic of early childhood professional practice in a series of contributions developed first in a special interest group on professionalism, hosted by the European Early Childhood Research Association between 2004 and 2016 (Dalli and Urban, 2010), and then in an international collaborative research project: 'De-identified' (Miller, Dalli & Urban, 2012). Applying a variation of *video-cued multivocal ethnography*, developed by Joe Tobin and his collaborators (Tobin et al., 1989, 2009), the project challenged the notion of a technocratic and universal definition of professionalism. Instead, 'De-identified – A Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner' provided the empirical base for recognizing multiplicity, context-dependency, unpredictability and uncertainty as the basis for any professional practice in our field, which Urban (2008) had proposed in an earlier publication. He argued for a more complex conceptualization of early childhood practice, shifting the focus from the skills and qualifications of the individual practitioner to the ways professional practice unfolds in reciprocal relationships and influences between all actors and their institutional environment. We refer to this interconnectedness and interdependency as the 'critical ecology of the profession' (Dalli, Urban and Miller, 2011; Urban, 2007; Urban and Dalli; 2010, Urban and Dalli, 2012).

Taking the concept of *critical ecology* as a starting point, and working with data collected in another collaborative project – 'Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care' (CoRe; Urban et al., 2011) – led to a proposal for the concept of a *competent system* as a holistic framework for developing and sustaining professional practice (Urban, 2012). Professional debate, national and international policy, and scholarship in our field have widely adopted the *competent system* as a framework for understanding, developing and sustaining *professionalism* in our field. Examples range from international to national and local levels of early childhood systems; they include European Union policy documents (Council of the European Union, 2011; European Commission, 2011; Working Group, 2014), national policy reviews – for example, in Ireland and Colombia (Flórez Romero et al., 2014; Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 2017; Urban et al., 2017) – and municipal quality frameworks – for example, in Utrecht, the Netherlands (City of Utrecht, 2013). The broad consensus about the need for such holistic and systemic approaches confirms the argument made by John Bennett, author of the first OECD *Starting Strong* report, that:

> ECEC [early childhood education and care] policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff? (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001: 63)

Recognizing *locality* as intrinsic to early childhood *professionalism* and, in consequence, to the formation of individual and collective professional identities has empowered a strong international counternarrative to notions of decontextualized *quality* (Dahlberg et al., 1999, 2007; Nsamenang, 2004; Pence and Moss, 1994; Penn, 2011).

The attractiveness of such a counternarrative within the early childhood field and discipline is not without risks. While firmly embraced by many scholars and practitioners, it has been, and

is, largely ignored by powerful agents that shape the field of early childhood. They include actors like the OECD, the World Bank and, increasingly, for-profit as well as philanthro-capitalist ventures. Operating on a global scale, these players promote and actively shape policies that have immediate implications for local practices with children, families and communities. A current example is the relentless push towards standardized, decontextualized testing of young children, promoted, for example, by the OECD in the International Early Learning Study. It is well documented how such approaches lead to impositions on local curricula and educational practices: *teaching to the test* tends to overrule diverse local practices and desired outcomes (Madaus and Clarke, 2001; Meisels, 2004; Moss et al., 2016; Moss and Urban, 2017; Urban, 2017; Urban and Swadener, 2016).

While individual initiatives (e.g. the International Early Learning Study) will have specific and distinct goals, they are situated in the fundamental assumption of neo-liberalism that privatization, commodification, deregulation and competition will lead to 'better' performance. The Finnish author Pasi Sahlberg (2016) refers to the political manifestation of the global neo-liberal push as 'GERM' (the 'Global Education Reform Movement'). He writes:

> GERM is not a formal policy program, but rather an unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions that are used as education reform principles to improve quality and overall performance in education … GERM has become accepted as 'a new educational orthodoxy' among international development agencies, consulting firms and private philanthropists. As a consequence it has shaped many recent education reforms throughout the world, including those in the United States, Australia, England, many parts of Latin America, some Scandinavian countries, and an increasing number of countries in the developing world. (Adamson, Astrand & Darling-Hammond, 2016)

This global 'reform' movement is driven by ideology rather than evidence or necessity. It is a powerful way of promoting one particular narrative of what – and whom – education is for, what counts as success, and how practices and successes should be legitimized, demonstrated and accounted for. Central to this narrative is the term *investment*, suggesting the transfer and accumulation of *capital* and, eventually, a *return on investment*. In this narrative, 'education' is reduced to a commodity to increase an individual's *human capital* and usefulness (often framed as *employability*) in a narrowly defined neo-liberal economy. In this story, the fullness of being in the world as a human – *Homo sapiens, Homo ludens* – is transformed (reduced!) to humanness in relation to economic activity only – *Homo economicus*. This, as Urban (2015) has argued, requires assimilation of diverse *ways of being, knowing and doing* into a uniform mainstream.

Where does all this leave us in our quest for professional identities? As a preliminary response to this question, we would like to suggest that we cannot give up our insistence on *multiplicity, diversity* and *locality*. Instead, we urgently need to reconceptualize *connectedness* in the face of global impositions. This is not an argument for a new search for a universal(ist) definition of our professional practice. It is, however, a call for *a systematic conversation across differences and diversity* about what we have in common and how we can come together, across differences, to find 'new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency' (Braidotti, 2011: 301).

We enter the conversation with a basic proposition, which is to understand all early childhood practitioners, without exception, as actors in complex systems (Urban, Macha & Scacchi, forthcoming). This understanding is grounded in Judith Butler's (2005) multilayered, critical and intersectional conceptualization of subjectivity and identity. Building one's identity, Butler shows, cannot be conceptualized outside societal (power) structures; it always takes place in relation to, and in struggle

with, these structures. For early childhood practitioners, these (power) structures materialize, at a fundamental level, as working conditions, pay, recognition, trust and level of professional autonomy. Our conceptualization of all practitioners as actors sits within a wider context of contemporary theoretical framings of governance in complex systems like education systems. Herbert Altrichter et al. (2011), for instance, convincingly demonstrate how inspection regimes in schools can be counterproductive, and document how countries (outside of the English-speaking world) are rediscovering the innovative potential of trusting teachers to do their job. Michel Foucault's (1980, 1982) *gouvernmentalité* offers a conceptual bridge between Butler's intersectional subjectivity, professional identity and systemic governance of early childhood systems – competent systems: there is no such thing as simple endurance of downward power pressure. Any engagement with the system has effects. Actors possess agency (Urban, Macha & Scacchi, forthcoming).

As Urban (2016) points out, there are new, emerging alliances we can build on, as well as some old and perhaps not so obvious ones. New materialist, feminist and posthumanist thinking, for instance, resonates with the work of indigenous scholars from around the world (Mertens et al., 2012; Ng'Asike, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Tesar and Arndt, 2017). It offers the possibility to *go beyond* the confines of Cartesian dualism that have left us, in the Western minority world, with a notion of a child whose mind, body and spirituality are disconnected from each other and from their being in the world. It will be important, however, that we stay aware of the risk of our silencing indigenous scholarship and activist voices through new layers of white, privileged discourse and onto-epistemological neocolonialism in order to gain academic distinction. What is required is geo-historical modesty and acknowledgement of origin: 'Indigenous ontologies never had a nature–culture dualism, never truly differentiated nature and culture' (Jones and Hoskins, 2016: 79). Our conversations and inquiries into professional identities should evolve, as Paulo Freire reminds us, from questions of purpose: 'education has always implicit utopias, dreams, desires and values. I cannot simply say: "I educate for nothing". Teachers insist on being teachers, this means they have a kind of dream' (Figueiredo-Cowen and Gastaldo, 1995: 18). We cannot *educate for nothing* and we urgently need to *go beyond* the self-referential conversation. Our conversations, instead, should be facing outward – and they should be centred around our 'utopias, dreams, desires and values', which we need to move from the implicit to the explicit. These conversations will be controversial, as it would be naïve to pretend that there can be one dream, one set of values or one utopia we all share. But to engage in that conversation, and to proactively initiate it within and, most importantly *beyond* our community of critical early childhood scholars, professionals and activists, will be a crucial step towards confronting the 'inertia or self-interest of neoconservative thought' (Braidotti, 2011: 301) that currently dominates the political climate in which we work.

Framing the conversation (2): forming professional identities through clandestine experiences

Our framing of teacher identity within the global context of shifting professional contexts outlined above recognizes that there are no easy answers or solutions to understanding teacher identity. Much has been written about teacher identity related to professionalism, qualifications and expert knowledge (Arndt, 2012; Moss, 2014; Ortlipp et al., 2011; Thorpe et al., 2016), attributes (Jónsdóttir and Coleman, 2014; Moloney, 2010; Sisson and Iverson, 2014), gender and early childhood education as women's work (Osgood, 2004, 2012). We begin to confront the 'inertia or self-interest' to which Braidotti refers above by suggesting that neither is there one singular theory through which to attempt such an understanding. Instead, the cross-country conversations

below are framed by the notion of subjects being forever in process, in an effort to articulate this inherent uncertainty. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's (1998) theory of the subject in process helps us to open up and articulate some of the complexities that contribute to what we know or can know about teacher subject formations, and their professional identities.

Conceptualizing teacher identity as always in process also opens up a humbling recognition that there are always unknown, even unknowable, elements involved in teacher subject formations. Subjects, Kristeva (2008) states, are 'infinitely in construction, de-constructible, open and evolving'. This openness implicates our examinations of teachers' professional identity further as it places subject formations within their surrounding cultural, societal and political context. Using the theory of the subject in process thus offers critical entry points that connect the inherent heterogeneity of teachers' identities and their contextual realities. As subjects in process, then, teachers are unable to ever know themselves completely, as Kristeva (1991) reminds us, and therefore are always in a certain way strangers to themselves.

Recognizing teachers as constantly in construction connects them through their mutual affect and interrelationships with each other, their work and society. Kristeva's (1998) notion of the subject in process has as one of its central elements the notion of the semiotic. The semiotic offers a way to recognize and articulate the intricate and intimate nuances of teachers, for example, as never completely products only of their own experiences (Arndt, 2016). In other words, it muddies understandings of teacher identity, and means, as Stone (2004: 124) claims, that we, and teachers, are always 'split subjects' and, as such, 'we must call ourselves (continually) into question'. Kristeva's semiotic creates cracks in attempts to easily understand teacher identity. The semiotic can be seen as an inner space that influences and affects subject formation both consciously and unconsciously. It thus offers opportunities to recognize those aspects of teacher identity that are, and also those that are not, necessarily understandable or even knowable by the teacher her/himself.

Through the semiotic, the idea that teacher subjects are always in process counters the homogeneity of the subject and of its surrounding structural context. This means that the semiotic helps us to recognize and acknowledge the non-linearity, unpredictability and complexity of governing or dominating laws, regulations, and national or international quality or achievement benchmarks, mentioned above. The semiotic validates teachers' identifiable as well as their unidentifiable responses to the complexity of their governing context. It connects them to the context not in a singular event, feeling or identifiable 'thing' that can be captured. As it lies mostly in the unconscious, it gives meaning, or signifies, in what can be described as an 'uncanny strangeness' (Kristeva, 1991: 83). Possible 'uncanny strangenesses' may play out for teachers as an energizing force, where subject formation is never static. It affirms the nuances, intricacies and complex ways that subjects – early childhood teachers – respond to, feel or are implicated by the regulatory and structural early childhood and wider societal and political environment.

When we view teacher identity through the notion of the semiotic, we affirm the complexity and unknowability of teachers as professional subjects. Its key contribution to our framing of this conversation is its call for a sense of comfort with discomfort. Conceptualizing teachers as subjects in process means that expecting teacher identity to be knowable becomes an unlikely aim. Instead, it creates openings to the complexity of teacher realities, contexts and knowledges. It affirms and validates the heterogeneity of ways of being arising from the multitudes of influences from each teacher's own, and their collective, surrounding policy, practice and pedagogical milieu. As subjects that are constantly in process, our conceptualizations through the notion of the semiotic emphasize and offer possible articulations for the speakable and the unspeakable energies and forces impacting teacher identity. It opens us up to Kristeva's (1991) insistence that we all are and will remain strangers in a certain sense, even to ourselves.

New Zealand experiences

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the lived and sometimes clandestine experiences of early childhood teachers are impacted by complex and contradictory factors in their local contexts and their global influences. One of these factors is that despite this interconnectedness, there is a lack of recognition in research and policy of early childhood teachers' cultural identity, and in particular their cultural Otherness (Arndt, 2017; Cherrington and Shuker, 2012). Within a cultural context that is both bicultural and multicultural, teachers are increasingly faced with growing numbers of children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), supports teachers' encounters with and teaching of the literacies of children's home cultures and languages. Neither the curriculum nor the wider policy context, however, is concerned with teachers' own cultural Otherness.

In an ostensibly sensitive cultural milieu, this policy and political context place early childhood teachers in a somewhat contradictory bind, between the curriculum framework and the wider economic and political milieu. *Te Whāriki* embraces the country's bicultural obligations in its aspirations for young children. Founded in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, the Treaty of Waitangi, between local Māori and the predominantly British settlers (Orange, 1989), these curriculum obligations relate to the principles of partnership, protection and participation. While the curriculum embodies such collective and relational Māori concepts as *manaakitanga*[2] and whanaungatanga,[3] the pervasive neo-liberal orientation and policy focus significantly contradicts such relationalities with its fixation on market growth and competition (Kelsey, 2015). Tesar (2015) has eloquently outlined and illustrated how *Te Whāriki*'s curriculum framework both bears witness and is a form of resistance to this context, and to teachers' contextual identity paradox.

Within this contextual milieu, the lack of attention to teachers' cultural Otherness is both exacerbated and illustrated by teacher attitudes towards cultural difference and diversity. Despite much recent curriculum and research focus on developing culturally responsive and appropriate pedagogies for children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Robinson and Jones-Diaz, 2016), research reflects the marginalizing attitudes perpetuated in teachers and teaching teams (Chan, 2009; Guo and Dalli, 2012). Concerningly, teachers' own Otherness becomes further sidelined when others in their teaching team prefer, for example, not to mention differences, so that the children do not notice them; to treat everybody the same, in an attempt to divert attention from cultural differences; or see paying attention to diverse cultural or religious needs, interests or eating habits as a burden (Arndt, 2017). At the same time, such teacher attitudes reflect their positions, as subjects in process, within the contextual tensions. They are formed by the pressures of competition, including to achieve local and international quality benchmarks, 'sell' their services to keep rolls full, and serve parents and children as 'consumers' (Duhn, 2010), while simultaneously being shaped by *Te Whāriki*'s aspirations for relational connectedness and cultural understanding.

Three dominant contextual concerns shape teachers' professional identities in this context. First, there is a dominant reliance on knowledge and an expectation that absolute knowledge exists and is possible. This concern plays out, for example, in expectations to know those who are culturally Other, and that such knowledge is instrumental and fundamental to good teaching and learning (Ho et al., 2004; Walsh, 2007). This expectation becomes unrealistic when subjects are seen as constantly in construction, as argued through Kristeva's (1991, 1998) theoretical perspective above, and renders what is known about an 'Other' at one time out of date or obsolete at another. It further alienates teachers who are culturally Other by assuming that some knowledges may be more valid or valued than others, for example, if they differ from the expected or dominant norms. As stated by Lisabeth, a white Latina immigrant teacher from Brazil, referring to her

early childhood teacher experiences: 'In New Zealand, where I have been living … the past 8 years, I have experienced invisibility, xenophobia and exclusion in many ways' (Author and deidentified, 2018: 116).

Another concern arises in a dominant expectation of dialogue as a solution to the problem of cultural diversity. This is commonly proposed in the multicultural discourses (Besley and Peters, 2011; May and Sleeter, 2010). However, for teachers from minority cultures, such as immigrant teachers from diverse countries, engaging in dialogue is a far more complicated and scarily revelatory undertaking than to 'solve' the problem of their difference (Arndt, 2017). In a context where teachers' attitudes tend rather to homogenize culture, in what Chan (2009: 31) sees as multicultural ethnocentrism, 'delegitimising historical and localised variations and specificities', or as Guo and Dalli (2012) claim, treating all children the same, for teachers to expose their own cultural differences in dialogue becomes a challenge that can lead to silence rather than to 'solving the problem'.

A further concern facing teachers' cultural identities in Aotearoa New Zealand is the common expectation to celebrate culture. Straddling the political neo-liberal and relational *Te Whāriki* divide, a well-meaning but often seemingly superficial tension in the early childhood discourse is the orientation towards seeing cultural diversity through a 'richness' and 'beauty' lens, and the expectation that it ought unquestioningly to be celebrated. As Guo (2015: 69) captures it, multicultural programmes are 'characterised by a practice of celebrating diversity' rather than 'a commitment to educational equity'. The impact on teacher identity of what might be seen as cultural tourism (Rhedding-Jones, 2000) reflects and exemplifies Kristeva's notion of the semiotic in both its conscious and unconscious embodiment of teachers' lived realities. To return to Lisabeth and other immigrant or culturally Other teachers in early childhood settings, being treated differently most of the time is a deeply personal experience. As Lisabeth states: 'I felt horrible, as I perceived that I was treated differently' (Arndt, da Rosa Ferrarelli and deidentified, 2018: 123). Superficial celebrations risk glorifying, rather than sensitively acknowledging and respecting, diversity, and localized contexts add further unpredictabilities to any universalized expectation. Rearticulating teacher identity through diverse lenses may offer potential cracks and openings to illustrate professional identities as diverse and complex, paving the way for attitudes of openness.

US experiences

US early childhood policy typically reflects a neo-liberal, standardized tone that defines professionalism in increasingly limited, credential- and college-degree-based ways. The plethora of quality rating scales for childcare settings also reflects implicit and explicit standardized norms for quality care, including who is qualified to care for and teach young children. Given that many families elect to have friends, family or neighbours care for their youngest children – sometimes referred to as 'kith and kin care' – these providers are often completely off the radar of quality standards. Other issues include the persistent low pay (typically minimum wage and far below for home-based care providers). National advocacy campaigns for 'worthy wages' for childcare workers in the USA peaked in the 1980s and 1990s (Park-Jadotte et al., 2002; Whitebook et al., 2014), and an emphasis on professionalism through credentials as part of quality ratings for care has replaced it on many fronts.

There is also no consensus on what constitutes early care and education in the USA (Gomby et al., 1996). Even with this lack of clarity, early care and education has become linked in policymakers' imaginations to education reform, with the time before children begin school, entering the reform gaze" with the issuance of the National Education Goals Panel's (1991) *Education Goals 2000*, which identified children's readiness for school as the number-one goal (Nakagawa, Peters

& Swadener, 2017). Despite this official pronouncement, national efforts regarding early care and education have historically taken a narrow focus on existing programmes, such as Head Start, and childcare subsidies, including block grants and special education (see Gallagher et al., 2004). In 2002, the scope broadened with the George W Bush era policy Good Start, Grow Smart, which conceptually linked federal and state early care and education reform activities to federal and state reforms resulting from the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. President Barack Obama announced general support for universal preschool and carried the general thrust of his predecessor's plan forward – most notably with competitive grants through a programme called Race to the Top, which provides funding to states to improve coordination among early care and education programmes, refine learning standards and focus on teachers' professional development (White House, 2013).

These presidential initiatives acknowledge that what is referred to as 'early care and education' is multidimensional and made up of different programmes with different aims, professional development systems, funding and regulations (Gallagher et al., 2004). Given the administrative fragmentation, and the resulting policy diffusion, it should come as no surprise that one point of consensus is the need to fix the USA's early care and education *non*-system (e.g. Barnett, 1993; Gallagher et al., 2004). Universal pre-kindergarten is another growing theme, with a growing number of municipalities adopting this approach. Very few childcare staff or early childhood educators are consulted about how to enhance these 'systems'.

Swadener and colleagues have been involved in an array of federal and state 'professional development' projects that have utilized learning community and culturally relevant approaches (e.g. Ciyer, Nagasawa & Swadener, 2010; Swadener, 2016), and work with culturally relevant programmes, including 'kith and kin' caregivers (Shivers et al., 2016), which provide non-regulated childcare by family, friends and neighbours. We have argued (e.g. Nagasawa, Peters & Swadener, 2014) that an overemphasis on quality rating status may take away from other key aspects of childcare, including access and affordability, and make the case for approaches that meet caregivers where they are and emphasize those who share funds of knowledge (e.g. Gonzalez et al., 2006). Language and culture with children in care must be recognized and supported. Swadener has also co-directed Bachelor of Arts degree-focused grants for indigenous early educators in Arizona that have emphasized language and culture revitalization, and directed a bilingual Latina/o-focused Head Start project in which teachers earned Bachelor's (four-year) degrees, as well as an infant-and-toddler project focused on continuity of care and learning communities.

These diverse experiences with early childhood teachers, caregivers, childcare centre directors, families and others involved in early childhood education have generated some broad themes that are relevant to this discussion. One theme relates to the challenges of requiring that childcare and Head Start teachers earn Bachelor's degrees. A common issue in these underpaid and high-turnover roles is the need to earn a further credential or even do extensive professional development/training when it will not affect the material conditions of early childhood educators' work (e.g. wages or time for these experiences). In other words, earning credits for a job they already have is not always 'good sense'. Even so, some of our learning seminars in a project now in its third year ('Entry Points') have had record attendance (over 60 at many sessions). This appears to be due in part to (1) the immediate relevance of the topics; (2) professional respect and the environment of the sessions, including providing meals; (3) expectations for the employer/centre director and teachers to attend as a group to meet state requirements; and (4) for coaching sites, workshops viewed as complementing intensive centre-based coaching from experienced early childhood consultants.

Reflecting on Kristeva's (1991: 83) notion of 'uncanny strangeness', the tensions and contradictions of being a childcare professional in a field that often undermines rather than supports professionalism – especially on pay day – are evident. Seeking more education for a job they

already have, many early childhood educators want urgently to access information and support that improves their craft and practice, but express frustration with a system that ignores their material needs. A recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story, titled 'Why are our most important teachers paid the least?' (Interlandi, 2018), confronted some of these persistent contradictions, including the critical roles of quality early childhood and critical roles of teachers in quality early childhood education. The policy choice to emphasize increasing educational requirements for early childhood staff, with flat wages and low entry requirements, continues to profoundly affect the early childhood field in the USA and elsewhere. When childcare workers/early educators do not make a living wage, do not have health care and other benefits, and struggle to find care for their own children, the 'uncanny strangeness' or irony of the discourse of professionalism and quality rating systems is evident.

While a full discussion of these dynamics and how they vary by cohort or community (e.g. indigenous early educators or bilingual Head Start teachers) is beyond the scope of this piece, close listening to those doing direct care/teaching in early childhood contexts is critical to understanding the lived experiences of early years educators. The irony of 'quality standards' leading to the loss of more experienced early educators who bring language and culture to classrooms is also a persistent theme. Many of the policies that govern teachers' lives are focused on readiness and quality. The following section, adapted from Nagasawa, Peters & Swadener (2014), briefly unpacks discourses of quality as they relate to childcare work in an era of quality rating systems.

Neo-liberalism and the discourse of quality in the USA

Quality in early childhood contexts is often assumed to be a fixed and objective set of qualities, both among professional and general publics. This notion lends itself to neo-liberal arguments for choice and free market logics that lead *naturally* to thinking of early care and education as a commodity – that is, 'you get what you pay for' (Cochran, 2007: 47). As early care and education as an intervention has risen in prominence, advocacy has focused on high-quality programmes, with both researchers and advocates frequently citing the finding that 70% of childcare centres can be characterized as mediocre in quality and nearly 13% as a threat to children's health and safety (Helburn and Cost, 1995). This is an alarming and serious finding, making conceptual clarity important. What is quality? What can be done to improve it? And what are the policy mechanisms needed to support it? While many might argue that the answers to these questions are known and the main issues revolve around political will (Brauner et al., 2004), it is actually a more complex idea than might be thought – a common-sense one built with equal parts scientism (Soto, L.D. & Swadener, B.B., 2002), a limited number of quality rating instruments created for one purpose yet being used for another (Lambert, 2003), and cultural assumptions (Tobin, 2005) that leave little room for questions of whose definition of quality counts (Adams, 2006).

While Tobin (2005) has argued that notions of quality should be locally negotiated and focused on dialogues among parents and professionals, children are typically omitted from research on quality, and the policy focus has been solidly on the *measurable* features, each of which contributes to one of the most vexing problems in early care and education: the interaction of quality, affordability and accessibility to families, which some have called the childcare 'trilemma' (Lash and McMullen, 2008). The trilemma's structural dynamic is as follows: in a business – and in the USA the majority of early care and education settings are private – where personnel is the highest cost (Cochran, 2007), setting more stringent group size and ratio requirements necessitates hiring additional staff members. This, in turn, may have adverse effects on the supply and variety of the services available to families (Helburn and Cost, 1995).

The dimension of accessibility is further compounded by limited and constrained options for low-income families, such as shifting and non-traditional work hours, a limited range of providers, and limited knowledge of how to navigate the childcare *market* (Chaudry et al., 2011). Resolving this problem has real implications for people's lives and life chances, as there is evidence that lends credence to the idea that participating in early care and education programmes that have been identified as *higher quality* is related to improved language, cognitive and communication abilities. While we problematize the notion of quality, and can critique the universalized measures of quality and exclusion of *Othered* children, parents, and early care and education professionals, there *is* still an important good-sense dimension – the kinds of resources, emotional support and knowledge that adults in these programmes can provide to children – that has serious social justice implications. Bringing early childhood educators into these discussions, at the sites of their labour and everyday lives, remains a critical challenge in the USA.

Irish experiences

In Ireland, the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce is beginning to mobilize and proactively engage politically. The Association of Childhood Professionals' advocacy on better conditions for the workforce and its activism within the field for a unionized sector has garnered support from an overburdened sector. A plethora of recent policy demands from various state initiatives to improve quality and accountability has pushed the workforce to demand change. The policy actions were imposed on the sector in the absence of any equitable discourse on working conditions for ECCE staff, including the gendered, part-time, low-paid work paradigm (Murray, 2016). The Irish ECCE system is complex and fractured by a binary system.[4] There is a multitude of actors following diverse practices and varied policy agendas. In addition to nine government departments, they include interest groups representing businesses and, more recently, two competing trade unions.

This has consequences for conceptualizing and the development of ECCE in Ireland, professionalization and workforce conditions (Murray, 2016). In order to overcome the inequalities in the sector, ECCE needs to be recognized as a profession. There must be the qualifications, wages, working conditions and career development pathways – as well as the public esteem – that characterize a profession (Start Strong, 2014: 9). The long-awaited early childhood strategy recommended in the national policy framework, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (Department of Children, 2014), which is at the midway point of this framework, has not yet been drafted. As the pressure for recognition builds, the government's Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs commissioned an Oireachtas[5] report in 2017 to inform government by looking at 'the working conditions of the early years education and care sector'. It recommends:

> Create a long-term vision for the sector. Devise an early years road-map to form part of the wider, and long anticipated 'national strategy'. The sector must be widely consulted with for this piece of work, and such consultation cannot be rushed. (Joint Committee, 2017: 26)

The newly formed early childhood unions, launched in 2017, are both calling for 'professional pay for professional work' (IMPACT and Big Start: SIPTU), as well as affordable ECCE for parents. In a recent *Review of occupational role profiles in Ireland in early childhood education and care* (Urban, Robson & Scacchi, 2017), professionalism, professionalization and professional identity emerged as major themes for all participants. There are, however, a multitude of different players attempting to define the profession and the professional identity of those working in it. In 2017, the Association of Childhood Professionals carried out a survey on behalf of a newly formed

professional committee to establish what the ECCE sector would like to be called. The survey outlined three options based on some preliminarily work undertaken prior to the dissemination of the survey to establish a shared title; they included: (1) early years practitioner; (2) early years educator; and (3) early years teacher. While the response rate to the survey was relatively small, 46.6% of the respondents chose 'early years teacher' as the preferred title. In a recent blog for *Scéalta – The Early Childhood Ireland blog*,[6] Marian Quinn (2017), chairperson of the Association of Childhood Professionals, argues that 'titles confer symbolic power' and by 'taking a step towards claiming the status and respect that is due to the work we do and to the children we work with'. Respondents to the blog demonstrated mixed views on the title 'early years teacher':

> The title of Teacher is viewed in society as being a respected and supported role and this is what the early years sector needs, more support and more respect. If this is what this title brings I am all for it.

> Personally, I was surprised the sector chose teacher as their title. I still don't feel it is a title that reflects me and my role neither with its connotations of listen to me, rote learning, everyone doing the same as the adult decides. However, as a sector wide player I'll accept teacher as the majority want to have a universal name.

Identifying a professional title for the ECCE sector is a valid ambition; choosing a title because of its perceived elevated status in the Irish context could be seen as short-sighted and not empowering or strategic. While acknowledging the shift by some to locate themselves closer to the dominant value discourse of education, the ECCE sector must look at what it may lose. There is an absence of a debate of what being an early childhood professional entails, specifically in working with the whole range of young children and not just the government-funded ECCE scheme,[7] which has become synonymous with preparing children for school (Moloney, 2015). To achieve the status warranted in ECCE requires open, collaborative discussion from the grass roots on what professional identity means for the Irish ECCE sector. That will require discussion in relation to care and love, education, development work, children's rights, ethics, values and a social justice stance.

The real challenge is a consistent disconnect between those organizations claiming to represent the ECCE sector (while, in fact, they represent specific vested organizational interests), departmental governance of the sector, and the vast majority of practitioners working with children and families. As a consequence of that disconnect, and of the persistent lack of systemic thinking, the ECCE sector is nowhere near a robust shared identity. This, in turn, has major implications for the sector at both the individual and the collective levels. If 'professional identity' is to become a meaningful concept that applies to individual professionals as well as the collective profession, a systemic turn is urgently needed. There is a need for a space to uplift and give those working in ECCE (mainly women) a confident voice to reclaim their sector.

Australian experiences

Early childhood education in Australia has been placed in the political limelight for the past 10 years with political platforms in the federal election in 2007 advocating and promising an investment in the early years as an economic endeavour and positioning within the global economic market. Like New Zealand, the USA and Ireland, in this time of global reform policies, educational visions are framed within a productivity agenda: 'Investing in the health, education, development and care of our children benefits children and their families, our communities and the economy, and is critical to lifting workforce participation and delivering the Government's productivity agenda' (Department of Education, 2012). The results of this agenda have been the development and implementation of *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for*

Australia (Department of Education, 2009); the National Quality Framework and Standards; regulatory changes in many states in relation to child–staff ratios, with an increase of staff to children; and the Early Years Workforce Strategy, with an increase in upskilling educators. These initiatives have created complex, multiple and, at times, contradictory spaces that have (re)framed teacher identities and (de)centred teachers' ways of understanding themselves and their pedagogical practices. It has raised many questions for teachers about their theoretical framing of who they are, what they do and why they teach.

The dominant discourses that circulate within and through the early childhood place qualifications and professional identity as the core of teacher identity, and quality assurance mechanisms as a gaze or monitoring device to regulate teachers' pedagogical practices to ensure good outcomes for children, which equals productive future citizens of the nation. Kristeva's (1998) notion of the subject in process rubs against the grain of fixed understandings of teacher identity and practices that can be seen and assessed. The *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy for Australia (2012–2016)* sets the scene for this neo-liberal agenda: 'To attract and retain suitably qualified educators, governments are working with the sector to improve the professional status of these roles. The National Quality Framework (NQF) will go some way towards this, through improved and nationally consistent qualification requirements' (Standing Council, 2012: 4).

The possibilities for understanding the subject and identity as always in process can occur through exploring the cracks within the early childhood. These craks opens up spaces for teachers to explore the multiple, complex and shifting identities that can occur at the site of the early childhood service. *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, when discussing the role of the teacher and their pedagogical practice, describes a teacher as an innovator and open to thinking and acting in the moment: '[Teachers] also draw on their creativity, intuition and imagination to help them improvise and adjust their practice to suit the time, place and context of learning' (Department of Education, 2009: 11). This text could be 'read' through a lens that understands the idea of innovation and creativity as learnable skills which 'all' teachers can master, implement and show evidence of. Alternatively, the text can be read as an invitation for teachers to enact creativity, intuition and imagination as performances that are multiple, partial, contingent, political and strategic. These identity performances may be replayed differently in difference moments (time), in different places and contexts. Kristeva's (1998) notion of semiotics in this situation opens up or authorizes understandings of identity as unknowable, shifting, contingent and a subject in process.

Invitations for further places and spaces to counter homogenized teacher identities can be read in the text, asking educators to draw on multiple theoretical lenses when developing and implementing their pedagogical practices:

> Drawing on a range of perspectives and theories can challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, and encourage educators, as individuals and with colleagues, to:
>
> - investigate why they act in the ways that they do
> - discuss and debate theories to identify strengths and limitations
> - recognise how the theories and beliefs that they use to make sense of their work enable but also limit their actions and thoughts
> - consider the consequences of their actions for children's experiences
> - find new ways of working fairly and justly. (Department of Education, 2009: 11)

This text can be read as a way of acknowledging and respecting the multiplicity of teacher identity and how teachers' lived experiences and the social and political world they live in constructs how they take up and are drawn to knowledges that are diverse. The opportunity to discuss and debate ideas related to theoretical strengths, differences, limitations and possibilities opens up

opportunities to challenge traditional developmental truths and think 'otherwise' (Mac Naughton, 2005). Thinking 'otherwise' creates ongoing possibilities to continue to rethink or reimagine one's own identity as a performance or process that continues to shift and change, where identity is understood as multiple, fluid and flowing – identities. But thinking 'otherwise' is complex, and Kristeva's (2008) writing reminds us of the importance of understanding the subject as always in process, and to consider the discomfort of being strangers to ourselves when dealing with multiplicity, questions and the resulting uncertainty of how we understand ourselves as educators.

Danish experiences

A point of departure for understanding the subjectivities of Danish early childhood educators could be semantics. In Denmark, early childhood educators are termed 'pedagogues' (*pædagoger*) – never 'teachers'. They work in 'kindergartens' (*børnehaver*) – not 'preschools'. They do not teach (*undervise*),[8] but facilitate 'learning' (*læring*) with due respect for children's play and well-being. The terminology reflects that Danish early childhood educators historically have seen themselves as different from schoolteachers and, most importantly, as someone who relates differently to children. This distinction from school does stem from a Froebelian tradition, but maybe more importantly from the specific history of the Danish kindergarten. In international comparison, Denmark witnessed a massive expansion of early childhood facilities in the 1970s. They were, however, primarily institutions of care established to care for preschool children while their parents were at work (Kampmann, 2004). Content and planning were left to the pedagogues. In the 1970s and 1980s, the pedagogue profession developed and grew with an aura of something liberal, loose, democratic and critical. Kindergartens were often – even when run by the state or municipality – characterized by non-hierarchical management. As Andersen (2007) points out, this was also a period when the profession was on its way to establishing itself, so there was a sentiment for experimentation. One more fact should be added in order to understand current subjectivities – namely, the relatively high proportion of early childhood educators without a 'pedagogue' degree (in 2017, around 41% of personnel in day-care institutions did not have the three-and-a-half-year pedagogue degree (Kamp, 2017)).

As Kampmann (2004) points out, the institutional logic and – in the long run – also the ethos and subjectivities of early childhood educators in many ways changed during the 1990s. During that period, the Danish early childhood sector saw changes that had parallels in other Scandinavian countries. There has been a gradual intensification of state and municipal regulation of kindergartens' content and direction. This intensification saw its preliminary climax with the introduction of a proper national curriculum for the first time in 2004. This is comparatively rather late historically, and even more so when you take into account that Denmark at that time had been one of the countries in the world with the highest numbers of children attending public childcare services. Andersen (2004) points to the fact that having a curriculum added to the professional reputation and legitimization of pedagogues. Instead of merely looking after small children like nannies, their position as educators who facilitate children's learning became more visible. Against this backdrop, it is striking that the introduction of the curriculum and learning goals was met with a high degree of scepticism from pedagogues. This scepticism, in turn, led to learning goals being targeted at the local learning environment rather than the faculties of the single child. In spite of this, the introduction of the curriculum was the beginning of a period with a stronger emphasis on instrumental learning and learning goals, testing (especially of language proficiency), leadership and, not least, school readiness – a number of reforms that in many ways are in line with GERM (see above). The general trend in the development is more testing, more instrumental learning and more screening.

Parallel to this, researchers have pointed to the emergence of what one may term 'new subjectivities' among pedagogues – a more rational and goal-oriented pedagogic professional. Not

surprisingly, this trend tends to be strongest among two groups: young pedagogues who have been trained in recent years and directors of day-care facilities. A generation ago, directors would typically be the first among peers. They would be locally rooted and typically lead a facility with 20–60 children, depending on age. They would take part in the everyday activities with children. But gradually leadership has become an independent activity – and within the last decade, directors have also tended to be leaders of much larger institutions, typically spread over several locations, with co-directors at each facility.

However, more interesting is that in spite of this transformation, there is still a strong undercurrent that links back to the historical roots described above. There is a strong sentiment against turning kindergartens into preschools, and an explicit resistance to very specific and instrumental learning goals. Paradoxically, the introduction of a curriculum has to some extent led to an explicit insistence on the value of children's play and self-organized activity. This, in many instances, has led to a strategy of the type: 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's' (Author, 2015). Such a strategy is not at all unproblematic, and can lead to a kind of split practice where documentation and the reality of practice are disconnected. But it does, on the other hand, point to the fact that pedagogues in their daily practice are often guided by something that is very different from political demands. The distancing from political demands, interestingly, has political impact. The current political agreement between a broad range of government and non-government parties on the new revision of the law for day-care institutions is a continuation of GERM policy – but it also expresses a certain ambivalence, with, for instance, no detailed goals and a ban on further demands for documentation.

Instead of a conclusion, a call to action: the ongoing struggle to (re)connect multiple and diverse individual and collective professional identities

Where do we go from here? Our intent when writing this article was to open up dialogue and debate across our various conceptual and geographical borders, and to engage in a collective exploration of current early childhood workforce strategies, policies and politics across different national contexts. We started from our own observation that, more often than not, these multiple understandings and conceptualizations seem to be grounded in our insistence that early childhood education has to be locally and contextually appropriate in order to be meaningful to children, society and practitioners. In a neo-liberal education context, the global and the local are inseparable, but the relationship is tense. Currently, the 'global' seems disproportionately dominated by the forces of uniformity, standardization and increasingly narrow predetermined outcomes. Against this, the 'local' (better, the multiple, diverse plurality of locals) seems weak and in disarray. However, as one of the – always preliminary – conclusions of our inquiry, we insist that the local and diverse construction and performance of professional identities (multiple, shifting, political and strategic) can open much needed possibilities to strategically work the cracks that have become increasingly obvious in the neo-liberal edifice.

Our glimpses of stories of early childhood practitioners' professional identities illustrate them as individual and collective subjects in process. Entangled with their local, societal and global contexts, drawing on Kristeva offers new ways to articulate how identities are always affected by, and formed alongside, practitioners' wider contextual milieu. Kristeva's notion of the semiotic helps us to see practitioners' *meaning-making* of their surrounding context, representing their feelings and responses – temporally, physically, through regulatory, policy or institutional action and processes – as expressed in the above country-specific insights. The semiotic also exposes and

gives us a way of articulating practitioners as affected in concerning ways by the various local and global contexts. Throughout this article, theorizing their identity through a Kristevan lens has helped to highlight often overlooked professional, personal, cultural and other ways of being that implicate early childhood practitioners' professional identities.

Moving between the local and the global, through the glimpses offered from New Zealand, the USA, Ireland, Australia and Denmark, and through an attitude of openness to early childhood practitioners as professional subjects in process, we can become, inspired by Fernand Deligny (1970), *vagabonds efficaces*. For this to happen, we will have to continue to combine our local grounding with global collective action. Similar to the much wider political struggle to counter neo-liberalism, identity politics is important but ultimately divisive. Early childhood practitioners, in all their diversity, have more in common than what separates them. Now is the time for solidarity.

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Notes

1. We are aware of the varied terminology that is used to refer to practitioners working with young children (and often their families and communities) in a wide range of early childhood settings. We have discussed (and continue to critically inquire about) the power and politics of such terminology to shape our understandings, expectations, self-perceptions and educational practices. However, this is not our focus here. In this article, therefore, we use the terms as they arise in their contexts (e.g. 'teacher', 'educator', 'pedagogue').
2. Focused on acts of responsibility, hospitality and a commitment to care for others.
3. Focused on such notions as relationships, collaboration and shared responsibilities for the other.
4. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills lead the ECCE sector, addressing issues of capitation and funding to quality initiatives. There are, however, seven more departments that have an influence on ECCE matters (see Author, 2017).
5. The Oireachtas is the Irish government. There are two houses of the Oireachtas: Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann.
6. *Scéalta* means 'stories' as Gaeilge (in Irish).
7. The ECCE scheme provides free preschool to children for two years between the ages of three and five.
8. The Danish word *undervise* has no exact English equivalent – but 'teaching' is close. This discrepancy linguistically mirrors and is interwoven with exactly the kinds of cultural differences that this article is trying to elucidate.

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