

Professionalism as Relational Practice: Guest Editorial

Päivi Kupila^a & Zsuzsa Millei^b

^a *University of Tampere. Corresponding author, e-mail: paivi.kupila@uta.fi*

^b *University of Tampere*

Professionalism in early childhood education (ECEC) has been widely investigated all over the world recently. Innovative studies gave detailed descriptions of recent and rapid changes in ECEC professionalism, both locally and globally. In this special issue on professionalism in ECEC, authors highlight the manifold relations that connect various actors and their professional roles at multiple layers of different systems. Professionalism, then, can be understood as something to be developed in terms of its reciprocal and manifold relations, such as part of regulations leveled by policy makers and the repercussions of those in the everyday work of professionals, or negotiations between professionals, parents, families and children as part of everyday practices, or as reflective practices in which professionals consider the expectations of and relations to others, and the accommodation of their actions to those.

This special issue of JECER focuses on professionalism as a relational practice in ECEC and publish original research articles and reflective pieces of ECEC researchers to further our understandings of professionalism in this relational manner. Applying a range of perspectives, the articles draw out different relations present in professionalism and raise further questions about and contradictions prevalent in evolving constructs of professionalism. This issue also reveals some interesting and unexpected ways in which professionalism unfolds for individuals, teams and institutions, between different institutions and governance levels, and how notions of professionalism are constructed in interplays between these multiple levels and players. By focusing on these manifold relations, the contributors provide invaluable insights into the dynamic changes that are currently taking place in light of timeless features that remain the core purpose of ECEC organisations: children's learning, growth and care, as the heart and main responsibilities of professional work.

The importance of ethical relations within early childhood research and professionalism is discussed in the paper of **Solvason**, who describes an approach they have developed to student research at the Centre for Children and Families, University of Worcester, UK, that ensures that students' research projects are caring and sensitive towards all participants. Solvason emphasizes ethical relations not only as basics for students researching others and their own practices, but also as essential for their developing professionalism. She argues for a direct relation between ethical approaches to research and quality practice, and for ethics in research as a training ground for furthering professionalism and quality provisions.

Reed and Walker reflect on the many driving forces and their relations that refine and shape professional practice in England and present a multidimensional and relational model for professionalism. They show how the professional roles of practitioners in ECEC are embedded in early education systems which require those who work alongside children to follow policies intended to promote quality early education and care. They explore how the many roles, responsibilities and relationships that professionals have are linked to these requirements and regulations. Reed and Walker provocatively ask whether existing regulatory systems are the only driving forces which shape professional practice and determine professionalism, or there is more to being a professional in ECEC.

Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, Reunamo and Lipponen investigate quantitatively identified differences between conceptions of recently employed kindergarten teachers, who have completed either university degree (kindergarten teacher) or polytechnic degree (social pedagogue), about their work profiles, competencies and stress levels. The reader can draw some connections between respondent groups' recognition of ambiguities in job description and division of labour that are related to their different educational backgrounds and stress levels. The authors provide important insights for pre-service training and how that foreshadows beginning teachers' conception of professionalism and task expectations and related stress levels.

Teachers' ideas about the changes that are currently taking place in the work of early childhood special education teachers are the interest of **Viljamaa and Takala's** research. Based on their analyses of responses collected through a questionnaire, they have found that teachers more often positioned themselves and their work as a target of change, rather than positioning themselves as being active actors in the process of change. They understood their changing professional roles in relation to shifts in notions and practices of special education, such as towards notions of inclusion and inclusive educational provisions and practices.

Similar to the changes introduced above, such as those instituted in the regulatory environments, affecting notions of quality and provisional and training patterns and

contents, the complex challenges of working life also require individuals, groups and work communities to cooperate interprofessionally across sectors and institutional boundaries. **Rantavuori, Kupila and Karila** examine preschool-primary school transition that challenges both preschool and primary school professionals' ability to collaborate. They investigate the development of relational expertise in the context of transition. They raise attention to how different interpretations of the purpose of collaboration can bring challenges, while at the same time common understanding can also be achieved through relational expertise. Essential to this is joint planning and discussion that develops relational expertise as part of interprofessional work.

In the last article of this special issue, **Keränen, Juutinen and Estola** focuses on a rarely discussed aspect of professionalism: bodily relations between children and professionals. They highlight the importance of touch through the stories practitioners tell about touch as a part of educational embodied practice in which personal experiences and cultural aspects intertwine. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, their research demonstrates that by becoming aware of one's own ways to touch, the meaning and uses of touch in educational relationships deepens. They therefore bring another important element of the complex relations between educational practices and professionalism to our attention.

The contributors to this special issue together illuminate and carefully explore some of the most important relations that do not only make up but what we must also consider regarding contemporary notions of professionalism in light of the rapid changes that effect ECEC today. What is common in all their work is that the focus on and approach to professionalism research must continue to be anchored in foundational notions of education, pedagogy and care of young children, and the manifold relations they compose between multiple layers of governance, different provisions and professionals, and in complex aspects of professional work.

We want to thank Leena Turja and Niina Rutanen for acting as editors concerning the article of Rantavuori, Kupila and Karila.

With best wishes

Päivi Kupila and Zsuzsa Millei

Guest Editors for this special edition of JECER