

Professional Collaborative Agency

Verity Campbell-Barr, Plymouth University and Jan Georgeson, Plymouth University

Concepts of professionalism within the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) have been debated internationally. Building on the premise that the ECEC workforce are central to the quality of services, there is heightened interest as to what constitutes a quality workforce and how this is evidenced. While quality and professionalism cannot be seen to equate to the same thing, much of the debate surrounding the workforce has centred on the knowledge required to fulfil the professional role. However, determining the function of the profession represents a meeting of different perspectives, often presented by the binary of 'bottom up' (ECEC professionals) and 'top down' (policy objectives), symbolising different expectations of the profession and the knowledges required to work in ECEC. However, this relationship is far from binary, as professionalism is both individual and social, the individual knowledge to fulfil the social responsibility of the profession.

Using Kaz Stuart's (2014) model of collaborative agency which highlights context, collective professional identity, collective empowerment and collective agency, we will explore some of the factors that prompt individual members of the ECEC workforce to collaborate. The history of the development of ECEC organisations presents us with many examples of individuals responding to local and occasionally personal needs. Sometimes these examples involve responses to national movements, such as the spread of Froebelism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the development of the playgroup movement in 1960s. In recent years, however, collaboration has often been prompted, both deliberately and consequently, by changes in policy. The most striking examples of this is the push towards integrated ECEC services in the four countries of the UK as a result of explicit changes in government policy, which were in themselves prompted by the stories of individuals suffering as a consequence of a lack of collaboration. A wave of 'joined up' working led to the Every Child Matters agenda in England and Getting it Right for Every Child in Scotland. Changes in government and financial climate might have pushed these initiatives to one side, but the need and desire to collaborate has persisted, giving rise instead to a collective response first to austerity and then to policy changes deemed to be deleterious to the ethos of ECEC. We will explore the importance of common ground (Kuziemsky and Cornett, 2013), shared values (Stuart, 2018) and sustainable leadership (Georgeson 2017) in shaping this newly emerging form of collaborative agency in the context of a disparate and still largely disempowered sector.

Georgeson, J. Sustainable leadership in the early years. 2017. In (eds) Huggins and Evans: Early Childhood Care and Education for Sustainability: International Perspectives

Kuziemsky, C.E. and Cornett, J. A. (2013) A Model of Collaborative Agency and Common Ground in Enabling Health and Healthcare through ICT, Volume 183 of Studies in Health Technology and Informatics pp 388 – 392

Stuart, K. (2014) Collaborative agency to support integrated care for children, young people and families: an action research study. International Journal of Integrated Care Apr–Jun pp1-13

Stuart, K. (2018) Value-based relational leadership practice in children's centres: an action research project, Educational Action Research, 26:5, 716-735, DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2017.1409129

Verity Campbell-Barr is an Associate Professor in Early Childhood Studies and Associate Director for Research at Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth. Verity has over 15 years of experience researching early childhood education and care services. Her research interests centre on the quality of early childhood services, particularly the role of the early childhood workforce in supporting the quality of services. She has undertaken international research on the knowledge, skills and attitudes for working in early childhood services and has recently embarked on an analysis of the full range of early childhood degrees available in England. Verity has written extensively on quality and the workforce in early childhood services and has recently published *Professional Knowledge and Skills in the Early Years* with Sage.

Dr Jan Georgeson is Senior Research Fellow in Early Education Development at University of Plymouth and has a professional background as teacher of young children with special educational needs. She has also worked and volunteered as a Portage worker supporting parents and carers of children with special educational needs. Jan carried out research at Birmingham University from 1995 onwards, completing an EdD in Educational Disadvantage and Special Educational Needs in 2006. She has carried national and international research into professional development for early years practitioners and support for families of young children at risk of learning delay, as well as ways of supporting teachers to develop children's computational thinking. Jan has written extensively on early years topics and is currently engaged in research capturing the sensitivity and skill of practitioners in 'micro-moments' of interaction with young children in early years settings.