12-6-2019

Choose Your Words Wisely: Descriptions of a Professional Early Childhood Practitioner

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the components that determine quality early childhood education and Care (ECEC) from the views of practitioners and parents participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010). A major component of quality ECCE as identified by practitioners in this study related to professionalism in ECEC. This paper presents a critical view on traditional perspectives on what it means to be a professional within the context of ECCE. It seems that within the ECCE model, a professional practitioner is one who finds purpose in their work. However, they are also experts in ECCE. That is, a professional practitioner is knowledgeable in ECCE has a deep sense of respect and love for childhood as a distinct period in human growth and develop. These characteristics are the embodiment of a professional practitioner. To describe this phenomenon, this research coins the term "professional purpose."

Keywords

Professional Identity, Professionalism, Vocation, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

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The purpose of this study was to understand the components that determine quality early childhood education and Care (ECEC) from the views of practitioners and parents participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010). A major component of quality ECCE as identified by practitioners in this study related to professionalism in ECEC. This paper presents a critical view on traditional perspectives on what it means to be a professional within the context of ECCE. It seems that within the ECCE model, a professional practitioner is one who finds purpose in their work. However, they are also experts in ECCE. That is, a professional practitioner is knowledgeable in ECCE has a deep sense of respect and love for childhood as a distinct period in human growth and develop. These characteristics are the embodiment of a professional practitioner. To describe this phenomenon, this research coins the term "professional purpose." Keywords: Professional Identity, Professionalism, Vocation, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Introduction

Earlier theoretical arguments on the meaning of a professional emphasise core characteristics. For instance, Miller and Keanem (1987) claim that "a profession continuously enlarges its body of knowledge, functions autonomously in formulation of policy and maintains by force of organisation or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct." (p. 1014). Evetts (2002) concurs, defining a profession as "knowledge-based and achieved following years of higher education and vocational training" (p. 2). The main difference between Miller and Keanem (1987) and Evetts (2002) definition of a professional is that Evetts includes vocational training as a component of a profession. Generally, traditional definitions of the word profession seem to have taken a functionalistic viewpoint. They maintain that a high level of expertise in a specific area is indicative of a true profession. There is an emphasis on autonomy, specialised knowledge, qualifications, adherence to a specific code of conduct and prestige when defining what a professional embodies (Goode, 1960; Hoyle et al., 1995; Parsons, 1951; Richards, 1998).

However, it appears that definitions of the word "profession" that focus solely on expertise and qualifications fail to address how the expansion and availability of university level education has impacted on the characteristics associated with professionalism. However, the conceptualisation of professionalism based solely on university education or attendance may not prove useful today (Brante, 2010). Hillis and Grigg (2015) theorise that professionalism "is now beyond ethics, values, and beliefs and includes behaviours and attributes" (p. 293). It seems that it is possible to be a professional even without fixed criteria such as prestige, qualifications and autonomy and that other skills such as personal values and the quality of practice may play a role in the development of professional identity (Hillis & Grigg, 2015).

Opposing the functionalistic approach, Maister et al. (1997) put forward an alternative interpretation of professionalism. He argues that real professionalism "implies a pride in work,

a commitment to quality, a dedication to the interests of the client, and a sincere desire to help" (p. 17). In the ECEC context it can be argued that to be viewed as a professional, practitioners ought to understand the importance of their work and seek to provide quality experiences for young children. Practitioners should have the best interest of each child as their main objective (The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, CECDE, 2006; Schonfeld, 2018). A key point from this argument is that many attributes of a true professional are innate, they cannot be taught; real professionals care. However, it seems that there is disagreement between governmental agencies and ECEC practitioners on what professional practice entails (Osgood, 2010). When describing professionalism in ECEC, practitioners tend to use words such as "care," "self-reflective," "professional as part learnt and part innate," "creative," and "playful" (Osgood, 2010). Likewise, Page (2011) found that mothers wanted practitioners to love their children; she uses the term professional love:

> Having explored the concept of "love" in the context of six mothers' choices, beliefs and dilemmas around choosing childcare, I contend that for these mothers, the concept of 'love' was a crucial phenomenon within the decision-making process about whether to leave their child(ren) and resume paid employment. (p. 320)

The available evidence seems to suggest that practitioners use phrases such as "love" and "care" to describe a professional practitioner while traditional definitions of a professional relies on academic skills, status and prestige.

Who Cares? Feminised Identity, Care Work and Early Years Provision

"The care of young children has been treated as a natural outgrowth of maternal instincts; a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material" (Jalongo et al., 2004, p. 146). Nyland (2013) states that "care work is a broad concept that covers all tasks that involve care activities undertaken in the service of others whether this is done for pay or without remuneration" (p. 230). Care activities are performed by doctors, dentists, child care workers and in a manifold of professions (Benoit et al., 2011). However, Benoit et al. (2011) makes a distinction between caring occupations which are reputable (the teaching profession), lucrative (medicine) and low-income jobs (i.e. health care assistants and nursery workers etc.). Whitehouse (2011) claims that lack of status, identity and low pay, is persistently linked to feminised occupations. Moloney (2015) proposes that the misconceptions attributed to the role of the "child care worker" (p. 4) have led to its devaluation. She further delineates that in past times, care work was viewed as the woman's work, a job anyone could do regardless of qualifications and training. However, practitioners in countries such as Sweden, New Zealand, and Finland, where a developed workforce has been achieved seem to receive adequate support and funding. Commenting on the ECEC workforce in countries such as New Zealand, Peeters (2014) maintains that professionalism and identity is derived from practitioners who are highly skilled and have access to Continued Professional Development (CPD). In contrast, practitioners in Ireland are lowly-skilled with few opportunities for Continued Professional Development (Moloney et al., 2013). While authors such as Whitehouse (2011) may focus on the feminised identity of ECEC as a barrier to its professionalisation, it is also important to acknowledge the impact of qualification levels and access to CPD on the professionalisation of the ECEC sector (Benoit et al., 2011).

Moloney (2015) acknowledges that "the struggle for identity" (p. 4) is specifically because of the negative connotations associated with caring occupations. Van Laere et al. (2014) contends that "child care workers" were historically unskilled labourers, hired by rich

families to fulfil the role of the "ideal mother" (p. 3). The characteristics of the ideal mother included a married responsible, white woman, who was financially dependent on her spouse and always ready to fulfil the needs of her children (Goodwin et al., 2010). Sims et al. (2015) maintains that the dichotomy between care and education, deriving from the myth that caring roles were solely for the good mother, has led to the low position of ECEC in society. It may be suggested then to link childcare with education, yet, Haddad (2002) warns that situating ECEC within an educational model has certain disadvantages.

Alcock et al. (2013) bring attention to the current economic and societal pressure on ECEC services to ensure that children are academically ready for primary school. Cummings et al. (2015) argues that an increasing number of children are being tested for school readiness. They warn that tests may be good to set out individualised learning plans but are inappropriate to evaluate the quality of the ECEC service. This may cause ECEC services to focus more on academics, thereby, downplaying the holistic development of the child. However, it could be argued that there are bigger forces which challenge the professionalization of ECEC such as fragmented policy and top-down approaches imposed by policy makers and low-entry barriers (Egan, 2013; OECD, 2012).

Another barrier to the professionalisation of ECEC relates to children's place in society. Historical concepts of childhood may affect current thinking on the importance of ECEC and those who work with young children (Zare-ee et al., 2014). In the 18th and 19th centuries, for instance, there was general agreement on the cruelty and disregard that many children were treated with in Ireland (Hayes et al., 2013; Lee, 2014). Hartas (2010) asserts that children today are viewed as vulnerable, who through public support and intervention programmes can be "transformed and redeemed." This view by Hartas (2010) is supported by a recent study by Daly et al. (2015) on children's rights and concerns on subjects like education and poverty. They insist that children are still treated with prejudice especially those from marginalized groups. This view does appear to be changing however, through increased research on childhood and policy documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Self-of-the-Researcher

I, Ayooluwa, am in the latter stages of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), my research is entitled "An investigation into the components that determine quality Early Childhood Care and Education: Practitioner and Parental Perspectives." My first degree was also in early childhood care and education and I became extremely interested on the effect of children's early educational experiences on later life. My curiosity in this topic was first sparked by the life of my Grandfather, Justice Anthony Aniagolu (1922-2011), who was born into extreme poverty in Nigeria, Africa. His mother always believed in the power of a quality education and even though basic necessities eluded them sometimes, education was always at the forefront of her mind. Coupled with his mother's support and his perseverance, my Grandfather received a coveted scholarship to study Law in Bristol University. He subsequently returned to Nigeria where he became a supreme court judge after many years of practising as a lawyer. Due to my Grandfather's life and my training in early childhood education and care, I have always held the belief that if given the opportunity, a quality education can catapult any child to unimaginable heights (García, Heckman & Ziff, 2018). This belief formed the basis for this study and prompted the question: "What is needed to ensure that children receive the best foundational early learning experiences, so that each child, no matter who they are or where they come from, can be given the tools to succeed and contribute to society in a positive way?" In my experience, one major component of a quality education has always been dependent the quality of the practitioner. Some of my findings from my PhD study related to practitioners

and parental perspectives on what it means to be a quality early childhood care and educational practitioner.

Methods

This section describes the methods, methodology and associated rationale for the various types of techniques used to collect data during this research process. In the first instance, Ethical Approval was sought and granted from the Cork Institute of Technology Research Ethics Board.

Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a contested and dynamic phenomenon. Perspectives on quality ECEC are dependent on cultural and social norms, as such, identifying key quality components in ECEC has proven difficult (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). Yet, it is within the subjective perspectives of key stakeholders such as parents and practitioners that quality ECEC is located (Katz, 1995). I used qualitative modes of enquiry (semi-structured interviews) in order to capture subjective experiences on quality in ECEC from practitioners and parents who were participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2018a). "The ECCE programme is a universal programme available to all [Irish] children within the eligible age range [aged 2.6 – 5.6 years old]" (DCYA, 2018a, p. 16). I utilised semi-structured interviews as they encouraged flexibility within the research process; participants often elaborated and deviated from the interview schedule to give new insights into quality in ECEC (Turner, 2010). This paper focuses on practitioners (n = 18) and parental (n = 15) descriptions of the key characteristics of an effective practitioner. These findings presented in this paper are part of a PhD study which investigated quality from the perspectives of Irish practitioners and parents participating in the ECCE Programme (Scheme).

Sampling Methods

I used the snowballing technique as it enabled me to target participants who would have expert knowledge on quality in ECEC (Meurs, 2016; Yuan, 2017). I asked participants to recommend other potential interviewees to take part in the study. I explained that anyone who was recommended needed to be an early childhood practitioner participating in the ECCE Programme (DCYA, 2018a), with at least a "Quality and Qualifications Ireland" (QQI) "Level 5" qualification in ECEC (DCYA, 2018b) or a parent with a child availing of the scheme (DCYA, 2018b).

Data Analysis

I, Ayooluwa, used the Grounded Theory approach was used to analyse the data. All of the theory generated emerged directly from the data "gathered and analysed" (Howard-Payne, 2016, p. 50) in the semi-structured interviews. I audio-recorded all of the interviews and transcribed them immediately after the interview was completed. The duration of each interview was between 40 minutes to 1 hour approximately. In keeping with Grounded Theory, I listened to the interviews and read the transcripts multiple times as part of the analysis process. In the first phase of the data analysis, I used open coding to generate "a list of codes and categories attached to" (Flick, 2009, p. 310) the interview transcripts. In the second phase, I used axial coding to the codes generated in the open coding stage were refined and "differentiate the categories resulting from [the] open coding" (Flick, 2009, p. 310). I also used a paradigm model (Figure 1) in order to understand the "relations between categories" (Flick, 2009, p. 310) in the axial coding stage. Following the open and axial coding processes, three major categories (accountability, professionalism and relationships) emerged from the analysis

of the data. I used selective coding to identify these categories (Mertens, 2005). For example, professionalism was a core category in my study, however, a sub-category was 'characteristics of an effective practitioner.' I also documented any "striking observations [from the interviews] and thoughts that were relevant to the development of theory" (Flick, 2009, p. 310) on quality ECEC in a research journal. I always looked for research to support or discount any subjective observations or thoughts that I had on quality ECEC to reduce bias in the research process.

Figure 1 Factors Involved in the Construction of Professional Identity

use of ideological effects to shape the discourse of the 'official' (through social policy etc) to determine the potential 'treatment' of children

Professional identities

Link between prevaling discourses and contemporary priorities and practices

Dynamic tension between 'macro' and micro level roles, relationships and expectations

Influence of training-changing curriculum objectives and methods of assessment

[Tucker 2004:88]

Ethical Considerations

I provided an information sheet and consent form to all participants via email before the scheduled interview. I detailed the objectives and criteria required to participate in my study in a one page information sheet using language free of jargon. I explained in the consent form that the information provided from participants would be kept confidential, participation was voluntary and there was no personal (i.e. financial) gain from partaking in this study. On the day of the interview, the information sheet and consent form were provided to participants. They read both forms and signed the consent form; a copy was retained by the participants. I kept the signed consent forms in a locked cabinet and these will be destroyed three years after the completion of my PhD.

Results

This section presents a discussion on the characteristics that quality early childhood professionals embody from the perspectives of practitioners. The main overarching themes that governed practitioners' descriptions were interpersonal skills and professional development (Figure 1). A practitioner with good interpersonal skills embodied characteristics such as a

caring, patient and non-judgmental attitude. However, they were also professionals in that they were experts in child-development, were abreast with current practice and implemented developmentally appropriate practice. Parents descriptions of a quality practitioner also focused on practitioners with innate ability and professional expertise.

Interpersonal Skills

All of the practitioners sampled emphasised interpersonal skills as a core characteristic in their definitions of a professional practitioner; words such as *"love," "creativity," "enthusiasm," "fun,"* and *"dedication"* took precedence. T3 states that *"yes, there is such a thing as a professional practitioner. They have a love of working with children, a deep interest in working with children."* Similarly, T9 expands on this view, arguing that having a love for children will always overshadow qualifications. She maintains that effective practitioners have innate attributes that cannot be learned, "*no matter how many years you spend in college you can't learn it. You have to have grá* [Irish word for "love"] *for what you do."* Interestingly, practitioners felt that a professional with higher-level qualifications should not automatically instill trust or denote competence in ECEC.

Professional Development and Natural Ability

Practitioners explained that trust was only earned when the practitioner not only possessed qualifications but demonstrated relevant practical skills, *"I have seen girls come in here* [ECEC setting] *for work experience, with qualifications coming out of their eyes* [sic] *but I wouldn't let them look after a turnip never mind a child!"* (T8). It was consistently acknowledged that qualifications, although important, may not be able to replace an individual's innate proclivity for working with children. T14 stated that she worked with practitioners who only had the minimum educational requirements needed to work in ECEC yet because they had natural ability and the right disposition they were more effective than practitioners with a degree in ECEC,

> … the qualification is really important but I do think it's the person's disposition as well. Over the years I would have had brilliant people…who would have had a level 5 [certificate in ECEC], it comes to them naturally…but then I would have had one or two people who would have a degree, they have all the theory but when it comes to working with the kids, I would say nightmare, an absolute nightmare. (T14)

> Practitioners explained that a vocation means that practitioners go above and beyond to ensure that they provide the best learning experiences for children (Urban et al., 2011). A vocation does not equate to lower professional standards or expectations; it is practitioners love of working with children, that drives them to continually put the best interests of the child at the forefront of everything that they do*, "Is it a vocation? Yes. Does that mean we should have lower standards than other professions? No. Actually, because we love what we do in spite of all the bad stuff should mean that we do our best every day."* (T15)

Interestingly, practitioners were also aware of the implications for relying too heavily on intrinsic characteristics, *"I am childminder to the general public who don't see preschool as a place where the child is learning and making progress all the time, they see it as childminding"* (T17). Practitioners understood the need for higher-level qualifications in denoting a sense of

professionalism and challenging societal beliefs on vocational training. However, they were also aware of the financial barriers which hindered them from attaining specific characteristics of a professional practitioner, *"it cost me €12,000 to go back to do my degree. I was lucky that I could afford it, but many can't"* (P10). Practitioners argued that there was a need to marry the vocational attributes (love and purpose) with higher-level qualification and evidence-based practices. They linked higher-level qualifications and suitability to work with children with the provision of quality practice, *"it is about the person and the job rather than their qualification but it is the qualification allows you to have the knowledge and the knowledge is what allows you to do what you do in a really, really good way."* T2 suggested that even though she had many years of experience working with children, obtaining an ECEC degree deepened her understanding of child development by equipping her with the right questions to guide children towards higher level thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). It also enhanced her observational and critical thinking skills,

> I had years of working with children but the degree helped me ask questions like why the child is doing this, scaffolding the child's learning, observing, saying things like "I wonder," "how does this work" and you're trying to stimulate the brain all the time. (T2)

However, this idea of marrying vocational attributes with traditional definitions of a profession was also an important step in professionalising ECEC. That is, practitioners felt that this would convey the message that ECEC facilitated positive developmental outcomes, *"I am childminder to the general public who don't see preschool as a place where the child is learning and making progress all the time, they see it as childminding"* (T17).

Parental Perspectives: The Amalgamation of a Vocation and Profession

Thirteen out of the 15 parents (87%) stated that early childhood education and care (ECEC) had attributes of a vocation such as *love and care"* (P8) and a profession (i.e. training and expertise).

> It's a profession. They have to be qualified for it and there's degrees there too. But I think it's a vocation because you have to love it, love the environment and love teaching kids. Its home life mixed in with school. When they get to primary school it can get more rigid and teachers can be stricter but I think…you have to love it. (P1)

Parents noted that ECEC is a profession because it necessitates the acquisition of training and professional expertise, yet P1 claimed that ECEC is a vocation because it requires the practitioner to love what they do. She recommended that ECEC should be an extension of the home environment where children are loved and cared for. Furthermore, the majority of parents descriptions is captured succinctly by P7 who describes an effective practitioner as one who has *"an interest and the patience to work with kids, they love it and make sure they get the best out of the setting they are in"* (P7). The majority of parents supported the view that effective practitioners have specific interpersonal and innate skills. The following quote by P2 captures this view:

> I do feel that there is a certain type of person that is suited to that job. From the people that I've met, they have great interpersonal skills, good imagination, and ability to relate to children on their level and tolerance for different children.

> They're personable, they're great communicators and communicate with parents because you're not just dealing with small people you must relate to the big people as well. I think vocation is the wrong word. We're all professional people and we all get paid. But I think there's a certain type of person that is drawn to it and loves interacting with children. (P2)

Although, the theme of suitability and love were central in parental descriptions of professional practitioners, the importance of qualifications was also evident:

> A good educator transfers their knowledge to the kids, is warm, loving, approachable. As I say. He runs to the door no matter what teacher is at the door. The relationships are a big thing for me. Relationships between him and the teacher. But they only get that knowledge from training and experience obviously. (P12)

However, the general consensus was that ECEC is a profession and a vocation, "I think it's both [a profession and a vocation]. When we talk about vocations there's potential for abuse in terms of work standards. I think vocation should be removed from any official records" (P3). This quote by P3 feeds into assumptions that society may view vocational work as akin to untrained *"people working at home* [such as] *relatives, aunts and uncles"* (P3). Whereas, a model which incorporates education is perceived as requiring specialised *"skills and training"* (P14) and *"on the job experience"* (P12). P2 further explains that, "no job is just a vocation. None of us are doing our jobs just because we love it. You have to get paid, you have to live, if you don't or can't pay your bills you'll leave" (P2).

Discussion

Quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) has various components, however, the quality of the practitioner is a key determinant in the quality of their practice (Burns, 2018). Therefore, understanding the characteristics (academic and practical skills) of an effective practitioner is vital to preparing practitioners and enhancing the quality of their practice. In this study, I found that participants (practitioners and parents) understood the value of qualifications but also argued that just because an individual has an ECEC degree does not mean that they will be an effective educator, especially if working with children is not something that comes 'naturally' to them. That is, practitioners argued that training does not substitute for a love of working with children and practitioners without an ECEC degree were sometimes better equipped to educate and care for young children than their peers with degrees in ECEC. Indeed, my findings suggest that practitioners and parents often described an effective practitioner using interpersonal and emotive words such as "love" and "care." This is supported by numerous research studies (Degotardi et al., 2013; Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Mathers et al., 2013; Page, 2011, 2013, 2018; Tonge, Jones, & Oakley, 2019), which indicate that good adult/child relationships and interactions are an integral part of a quality ECEC curriculum. My findings also suggest that relying extensively on interpersonal characteristics to describe effective practitioners may unintentionally lower the status of ECEC or support the idea that those who work in ECEC are lowly-skilled (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010).

However, the present study also substantiates the work of Frey (1993), who developed the idea of intrinsic motivation. Frey argues that intrinsic motivation motivates practitioners to do their best and excel at their vocation. Moreover, my findings demonstrate that a professional practitioner has a "professional purpose." That is, they are highly-qualified practitioners who

love working with children (characterised by responsive and emotionally attuned practices). Findings indicate that these two characteristics (love and expertise in ECEC) are vital for the professionalisation of ECEC and are key attributes of an effective practitioner (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Characteristics of a Professional Practitioner: Practitioners Perspectives

Comparatively, *"the hegemony of government discourses"* seem to consistently reiterate fixed criteria such as *"rationalism and accountability"* (Osgood, 2010, p. 125) in their definitions of professionalism. Due to this, it may be useful to merge technical based classifications of professionalism and intangible characteristics (love and care). That is, *"a new kind of professionalism built on an ethics of caring"* (Aslanian, 2014, p. 24), which also includes the idea of expertise and specialised training is the embodiment of an effective practitioner (Löfdahl, 2014). However, there are barriers in realising a practitioner's professional purpose, which include financial challenges in pursuing higher-level qualifications. Salaries for those working in ECEC are low (King et al., 2016), while findings from the current study indicate that tuition cost barriers act as a disincentive to professional advancement in ECEC. As a result, Whitebook, Phillips and Howes (2014) argue that *"it is time to confront the low premium that is placed on educational attainment within the early childhood teaching workforce"* (p. 82).

> *"When love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece*
> (Ruskin, 1992, p. 370).

Limitations

1. Due to the time-intensive nature of this support process, the resources needed to extend the research to a larger sample was not available at the time of conducting this study. Therefore, results cannot be extrapolated to a wider population. However, the main aim of this study was to explore practitioners

and parental views on quality ECCE, rather than to make generalisations or produce statistical evidence.

2. The snowballing technique was adopted to gain access to ECCE practitioners and served as a referral mechanism. However, a weakness of the snowballing technique is the possibility of introducing bias into the data collection procedure as participants may only refer others who have similar views to them (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Liamputtong, 2010). This was combatted by providing participants with clear instructions with regard to who was eligible to take part in the study.

3. Grounded Theory was used in the analysis of the data. This theory recommends that the researcher approaches the analysis of data during open coding without any preconceived beliefs. However, it was important to acknowledge that the researcher's past influences and training in ECCE could impact on the open coding process. The researcher consistently reflected on how her professional and personal life experiences could impact on her worldview and her interpretations of the data. A research journal aided in this process of transparency and reflection on any potential bias held by the researcher. The journal also aided the researcher in documenting any "*striking observations [from the interviews] and thoughts that are relevant to the development of theory*" (Flick, 2009, p. 310) on quality in ECCE.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The current research indicates that professional purpose relates to practitioners who love working with children and express this in their daily interactions with children. This is reflected in their ability to build positive relationships in the ECCE environment. However, these practitioners are also adept in theoretical applications and regularly partake in continued professional development (Manning et al., 2015; OECD, 2012; Wall et al., 2015). Comparatively, government definitions of professional practitioners seemingly focus on aspects such as accountability, expertise and training (Osgood et al., 2010), albeit, in the absence of vocational attributes (love and care) which are vital to quality ECCE.

Furthermore, *"the hegemony of government discourses"* (Osgood, 2010, p. 125) seem to consistently reiterate fixed criteria such as *"rationalism and accountability"* (Osgood, 2010: 125) in their definitions of professionalism. Due to this, it may be useful to merge technical based classifications of professionalism and the less tangible characteristics such as love and care in professions such as ECEC. It is recommended that *"a new kind of professionalism built on an ethics of caring"* (Aslanian, 2014, p. 24), founded on values (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Hillis & Grigg, 2015) and the importance of training (Löfdahl, 2014), as reflected in the concept of "professional purpose," coined by this study, is emphasised in governmental descriptions of a professional practitioner. Professionalism in ECEC should not only be attributed to accountability and expertise but should also acknowledge interpersonal characteristics that are hard to measure but integral to the work of a quality and effective practitioner. Importantly, this endeavour can only be realised through ongoing consultation with stakeholders (practitioners, children, parents and policy makers).

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Article Citation

Oke, A. (2019). Choose your words wisely: Descriptions of a professional early childhood practitioner. *The Qualitative Report, 24*(12), 3047-3060. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss12/8