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Reconcepualising professional development in early childhood education

A study on teachers' professionalism
carried out in Bologna province

Foreword by
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Contents

Foreword

di Lucia Balduzzi*

The present book investigates a topic of high relevance for the discipline of early childhood education both nationally and internationally: the issue of professionalism of teachers working in preschool institutions. The contribution draws on the findings of a small-scale, in-depth empirical research carried out in Bologna province and explores in details how professional practice can be understood — and its development supported — in the highly complex field of working with young children, families and local communities.

The study presented in this volume offers a unique contribution to the advancement of understanding of early childhood professionalism from a systemic perspective as it provides a critical analysis of teachers' subjective and intersubjective perceptions, which is constantly related to the institutional, social and cultural contexts within which teachers' conceptualisations are grounded.

In her introduction, the author contextualises the study in the hermeneutical situation of the researcher, orienting it towards a sociological framing of profession in contemporary society and situating it within the concrete socio-political arena of Emilia Romagna and Bologna in particular. It is precisely this multi-dimensional contextualisation — providing an historical perspective on present day discussions and possible future directions — that makes this book stand out among other contributions to the international academic discussion on professionalism in early childhood.

The socio–political and historical context of state, municipal and catholic preschool institutions in the Emilia Romagna Region and in the municipality of Bologna is spelled out in details in the first chapter. A quite knowledgeable and fascinating historical overview of the social constructions, meanings and understandings related to early childhood teachers' professionalism is provided through a comprehensive, yet critical, analysis of governmental legislative documents shedding light on why things are as they are, as well as on how fragile the values of experimentation, participation and collegiality may be in times of neoliberalism.

The need for an in-depth and knowledgeable contextualisation in investigating the issues related to teachers' professionalism in the field of

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early childhood is mirrored — too — in the second chapter, where the contribution of phenomenographical to this field of inquiry is analysed in details from a methodological standpoint. In this sense, an original and well argued discussion on the application of phenomenographical methods for collecting and analysing data related to teachers' conceptualisations of their everyday educational and care practices enacted within preschool settings is provided, clearly showing how features of professionalism vary according to the different institutional arenas they are enacted in.

In the third and fourth chapters, the themes emerged from the empirical research conducted with early childhood teachers are critically examined in the light of contemporary theories on professional identities' constructions, on situated learning within communities of practices and on the ethical dimension of education and care work. In particular, the author identifies three axes as main directions around which the professionalism of early childhood teachers revolves and constantly evolves. The first one is the ongoing co-construction of pedagogical knowledge with professional colleagues, children and families through reflection on everyday interactions taking place within preschool institutions. The second aspect concerns the dimension of professional practices, with specific reference to those methodological and reflective competences that allow early childhood teachers to encompass — at the core of any education and care initiative — children's intentionality and meaning-making processes. Finally, the third aspect concerns the value-laden dimension of early childhood professionalism, which reveals how everyday relationships with children, parents and colleagues are inevitably shaped by teachers' ethical concerns regarding their educational and social responsibility within the broader community.

The fact that the dimensions analysed in depth by the author in her study have been increasingly recognised as constitutive elements of early childhood professionalism both in international academic debates (Miller, Dalli & Urban, 2012) and in national pedagogical debates (Balduzzi & Manini, 2013; Bondioli & Savio, 2015) stress the significance of the work presented in this volume for rethinking the professional role of early years practitioners in contemporary times. In this sense, the deep insights offered by this empirical research endeavour could offer an important contribution toward defining those systemic conditions – collective reflectivity, professional guidance and support, ongoing development – sustaining and enhancing the professionalism of early childhood practitioners within the integrated 0–6 perspective forwarded by the Law Decree 65/2015[1] recently enacted by the Italian Government.

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1. *Istituzione del sistema integrato di educazione e di istruzione dalla nascita sino a sei anni, a norma dell'articolo 1, commi 180 e 181, lettera e), della legge 13 luglio 2015, n. 107* (17G00073): www.gazzettaufficiale.it /eli/id/2017/05/16/17G00073/sg.

The contribution of this book to the academic debate — and its relevance to professional practice and policy making — is even more important from a wider European perspective, as it investigates a topic of increasing importance for all European member states as well as for the European Union as a whole: the relationship between professional expertise and the public, responsibility for education of younger generations, which stand at the core of our democratic societies. Written in English – and therefore accessible for an international academic audience communicating in this 'lingua franca' – this study opens a window to the rich philosophical and theoretical traditions of Italian Educational Science.

I am therefore honoured to introduce this very original study that I consider to be at the forefront of European research in the early childhood field and that I am sure will stimulate further reflection on the issue of practitioners' professionalization both nationally and internationally.

References

Miller L., Dalli C., Urban M. (2012), *Early childhood grows up: International perspectives on early childhood education and development*, Dordrecht: Springer.

Balduzzi L., Manini M. (2013), *Professionalità e servizi per l'infanzia*, Roma: Carocci.

Introduction

The book focuses on the topic of professionalism and professional identities of early childhood teachers'[1] by drawing on the findings of a research project carried out in Bologna province. The project, conducted by the author within the Department of Educational Sciences of Bologna University, took origin from a previously funded study that aimed to investigate early childhood teachers' conceptualisation of care with specific reference to the professional support practices implemented within the institutions where they were working (Contini and Manini, 2007). Such study revealed that the aspect of «being cared for» as professional — in terms of being welcomed when joining in a new team and establishing relationships of mutual support with colleagues — is a key element in contributing to early childhood teachers' personal and professional development. In fact, it emerged from the study that establishing good relationships with colleagues «not only allows practitioners to work in better conditions, but also allows them to find — within relationships — the space and time to reflect on their work and, therefore, to grow as professionals» (Balduzzi, 2011). If on one hand, these findings opened up a discussion on early childhood teachers' professionalism that needed to be further explored, on the other, several critical issues were pointed out. In particular, a widening gap seemed to be emerging — according to practitioners' perceptions — between the organisational structure of early childhood institutions and their everyday educational work:

> The statements written by the teachers express full satisfaction for their everyday work with children in the classroom. This is perceived [by the teachers] as their "real work", the core of their profession. Instead, they feel unease in regards to the increasing bureaucratic work load that they are required to accomplish: compiling reports, writing projects, managing contact with other institutions and so forth (Gherardi, 2007, p. 10).
> The model of pedagogical coordination needs revision. Teachers' statements express criticism toward pedagogical coordinators who are scarcely present in early

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1. The expression "early childhood teacher" will be frequently used in the book — beside the term "practitioner" — to identify any person with qualified teacher status working in early childhood education institutions with children aged from three to six (*scuola dell'infanzia*). The choice of using the term «early childhood teacher» is motivated by the fact that it constitutes a close translation of the Italian term *insegnante di scuola dell'infanzia* with which practitioners identify themselves as professionals.

childhood services [...]: their sporadic visits in the classroom aim to solve urgent problematical situations rather than to constantly supervise pedagogical practices. The low number of pedagogical coordinators probably contributes to create this situation (Gherardi, 2007, p. 15).

Teachers' statements express criticism toward many of the provided in–service training courses that do not offer a substantial contribution [to their professional development] because they are distant from the "real problems" experienced in the settings within which they are working. Either they are too theoretical or they are chosen on the basis of irrelevant criteria: as they do not take into account individual needs, they are perceived as an imposition. (Gherardi, 2007, p. 15)

Following the result of this study, a new research project was funded with the aim of further exploring practitioners' perspectives on their professionalism and reflecting on possible paths for professional development. Therefore, the research contribution presented in this book addresses three main questions:

    a) how early childhood teachers' professionalism is conceptualised in teachers' perceptions of their everyday work?
    b) how do teachers' perceptions on their professionalism relate to the different institutional settings within which they are working?
    c) what do teachers' perceptions on their professionalism tell us in terms of "needs" to be taken into account for sustaining their ongoing professional development?

By addressing these questions and analysing the interrelation existing between them, it will be possible to identify some relevant information on how professional knowledge is generated and shared in early childhood education institutions in order to re–define the way in–service teacher training is provided. The perspective adopted for investigating teachers' professionalism in this research project reveals a broadly sociological concern as well. The idea standing at the core of the research is that exploring the concept of professionalism from a ground–up perspective — that focuses on practitioners' understanding of their educational practices — can lead to important reflections for re–thinking professional development as a space for change «directed from within» early childhood education institutions.

Considerations on terminology

It is a deliberate choice to use the abbreviation ECE instead of ECEC to refer to institutions, practices and policies in this field. In English speaking countries the expression «education and care» is used to open up the limitation of both terms that are perceived as complementary but at the same

time separate: "education" understood as something to do with learning in formalised setting, 2009) and "care" alluding to «what women do unpaid in the home for children» (Cameron & Moss, 2007, p. 10). Both conceptualisations are narrow as they do express the complexity of the work with young children, where the aspect of education and care — understood in broader terms — are deeply intertwined in everyday pedagogical practices. Behind the choice of adopting the word "education" in a holistic sense stands the concern to overcome this conceptual split between education and care, reflecting the broader educational connotation that characterises *scuola dell'infanzia* in Italy.

Moreover, every time the abbreviation ECE is used in this book, it is with specific reference to institutions, policy and practices related to education of children aged from three to six unless otherwise specified. Although the expression "ECE institutions" is more frequently adopted, the term "pre–school" might also be used to refer to *scuola dell'infanzia*: however it should be clear that the term in this context does not allude at pre–primary education conceived as functional to school readiness.

The expression «early childhood teacher» or simply "teacher" is frequently used — beside the term practitioner — to identify any person with qualified teacher status working in *scuola dell'infanzia*, therefore including both "class teachers" and "special needs teachers" working together in integrated classes.

The expression «in–service training» that is used from time to time in this book to define continuous education of teachers is also problematic, as «in recent years in particular, it has increasingly taken on technical, competencies–and–skills connotations in the educational field. In this narrowing sense it fails to do justice to the wider reaching aims of professionalisation as identified by the research community» (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 7).

For this reason, the use of the term "formation" has been preferred, as it emphasise a broader connotation of teachers' continuous education that encompasses the dimension of personal as well as professional development. The word "formation", in this sense, recalls the meaning of the Italian word *formazione* that it is used to designate professional development as well as the more general formation of the person (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 137).

Investigating early childhood professionalism in contemporary society

In recent years the issue of early childhood professionalism has become particularly relevant at European level both in academic debates and in policy making discussions for multiple reasons.

At European level, the discourse of professionalism has been mainly associated with the discourse of quality of ECE institutions that has become increasingly important in the policies promoted by the European Commission (Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training, 2009; Communication on ECEC, 2011). In this sense, concerns about competitiveness, employment and social inclusion contextually to the creation of a knowledge based economy seems to be predominant (European Commission, 2010). Specifically, the rationales for investing in ECE reveal — so far — mainly economic and social concerns, even though new perspectives are opening toward the importance of such institutions from an educational point of view. From an economic perspective ECE services are seen as means to face the demographic challenges of an ageing population, to create employment by increasing women's labour market participation and as a measure that promotes gender equality by reconciling work and family responsibilities (European Commission, 2007b; 2010; 2013a). From a social perspective ECE institutions are seen as means to reduce poverty, discrimination and social disadvantage by providing equal access to high quality provisions to all children (European Commission, 2011, 2013b). Therefore, from the policy context outlined so far, it emerges that the discourse of ECE professionalism is inextricably linked to discourse of quality services: the fact that a professionalised early childhood workforce is crucial in guaranteeing the achievement of the mentioned policy goals seems to be widely recognised (European Commission, 2007a; 2009; 2011).

In the academic debate, both nationally and internationally, the issue of ECE professionalism has received an unprecedented attention, which is demonstrated by the constant increasing of literature on this topic that has characterised the last ten years. An eloquent example of this is that in the last two years, more articles on this topic have been published in the Social Science Citation Index (ISI) than in the whole decade before (Uban *et al.*, 2011). However, the attention for the professionalisation of the early years workforce — especially if understood as a situated process — is still a relatively new and emerging phenomena in the international academic debate (Moss, 2006). In the Italian academic debate, the issue of early childhood professionalism has become increasingly relevant over the last fifteen years in relation to a growing interest developed along two strands of research. The first strand includes the studies carried out by Universities — often in collaboration with local authorities — that are addressing the issue of early childhood professionalism contextually to the debate on ECE quality within the formative evaluation framework (Bondioli and Ferrari, 2004a; 2004b) or in relation to reflective practices (Fabbri & Rossi, 2003; Fabbri, 2007). Whereas the second strand, includes the studies

carried out by the Faculties of *Scienze della Formazione Primaria*[2] reflecting on teachers' professionalism from the angle of initial professional preparation (Galliani and Felisatti, 2001–2005; Nigris, 2004).

Obviously, the time in which this research has been conducted can be identified globally as a time of great change and tensions: in this context, making explicit the conceptual framing and assumptions underlying the research study illustrated in this book becomes extremely important for its relevance.

First of all, it needs to be said that even though the perspective I adopted in investigating this topic is intrinsically pedagogical — as at the core of the empirical study stands an interest for the very nature of the educational work — the research is framed within a broad sociological concern. Assuming that any reflection on education necessarily implies a reflection on its role within the society, it becomes somehow inevitable to engage with sociological interpretative categories. Reflecting on the role of education means, in these terms, reflecting on meanings, purposes and values that are historically, culturally and politically constructed: therefore, as an educational researcher, I need to be able to handle conceptual categories that allow me to interpret underlying assumptions and aspirations of society that are projected into the education systems. Researching ECE professionalism in the context of a rapidly changing and complex society as the one we live in today becomes, therefore, a difficult and demanding task which requires a preliminary understanding of social conditions and trends that are generating the multiple — and sometimes contradictory — demands placed upon education and, therefore, upon teachers. Only through a deep sociological analysis that aims at making these processes visible and at unfolding their underlying assumptions, it will be possible to contest these processes by creating new shared meanings, purposes and values for generating educational change.

In this perspective, investigating professionalism in ECE field requires, in the first instance, a critical reflection on the conceptualisation of professionalism which is a term traditionally applied in the field of sociology of professions. I will refer here to the work of the sociologist Elliot Freidson (1923–2005) as a broad conceptual framework for positioning the study. Freidson elaborated a conceptual framework in which professionalism is defined as a method of organising work. In describing his model of ideal–typical professionalism, he defines professions as specialised occupations whose practice is officially believed to require the use of discretion founded on

2. Through a major national initiative, the Faculties of Science of Primary Formation were assigned the task of providing initial training for pre–school and primary teachers with the aim of raising their qualifications to university level (MIUR Decree, 1998 and Ministry Decree 509/99).

knowledge and skills that necessitate a formal learning. In ideal–typical professionalism a series of institutional devices ensure the specialised workers to have the control over their own professional work and over the production and the managing of the professional body of knowledge. In his work Professionalism: the third logic Freidson juxtaposes the logic of institutional ethic which characterises ideal–typical professionalism (enabling professionals to maintain the control over their own work) to the logic of consumerism (where the consumers are in command) and to the logic of bureaucracy (where managers are in control). In particular, by theorising these three socio–organisational models, the author illustrates their logic showing how the different ideal–types requires different kinds of knowledge production and knowledge transfer, organisation, career, education and ideology (Freidson, 2001). Freidson's work offered indeed one of the most important contributions to the field of sociology of professions and its accurate descriptive model provides an effective explanation of what are considered today the key–features of professionalism in the sociological field.

My argument here is that — although Freidson functionalist approach to professionalism does not provide an adequate ground for exploring the characteristics of professionalism in early childhood (Urban, 2008) – the broad theoretical framework in which he describes the principles and characteristics that differentiate the three logics (consumerism, managerialism and professionalism) offers very pertinent conceptual categories for analysing the ideological assumptions underlying the processes of transformation that are currently taking place in society and therefore affecting the education systems with inevitable consequences on teachers' professionalism. In particular, Freidson's analysis might give account, to a certain extent, of the implicit risks which are emerging in recent international trends affecting in early childhood education: «If we look at systems of public schooling, seemingly contradictory developments are taking place. There is evidence both of efforts to decentralise or privatise responsibility and of tighter government control» (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 12).

On one hand, the trend toward privatisation could lead to a conception of ECE institutions as goods to be consumed instead of services: this will have inevitable consequences on their educational identity and, therefore, on the conceptualisation of professional identities of practitioners. On the other hand the trend toward managerialism, could lead to a technocratic conception of ECE services which are seen as means for production of human capital: in this perspective the process of learning is perceived in terms of efficient application of standardised strategies in order to deliver predetermined outcomes. The risk implicit in this model is the promotion of a competence–based teacher training system rigidly defined by national

standard and goals, with no emphasis on ethic and pedagogical values. In this framework, it can be argued that the form in which continuing professional development is provided is not neutral: in fact, implicit assumptions and values about the role of professionals and services are laid in every formative proposal. In this context, redefining early childhood teachers' professional development by exploring the concept of professionalism from a ground–up perspective, it means to adopt the logic of professionalism, as expressed in Freidson's analysis, as a guiding principle orienting the research activity.

Designing the study

As the research questions indicated in the section above have indicated, the aim of the study presented in this book is to investigate teachers' perceptions on their professionalism, how they relate to the institutional settings they are working in and what these aspects tell us in terms of needs that should be taken into account in redefining professional development within ECE institutions. The empirical work consisted of focus groups and written interviews with 60 early childhood teachers working in state, municipal and private faith institutions (FISM) in Bologna province. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select the teachers taking part in the study. The main criteria that guided the sampling were:

a) to have approximately equal numbers of teachers working across the three different types of ECE institutions (state, municipal, FISM) represented;
b) to have a balanced sample that includes newly recruited and more experienced teachers (in some groups substitute teachers were also present);
c) to have access to highly motivated teachers who were willing to discuss the issue of professionalism as relevant to them. For this reason, teachers who took part in the study did so on a voluntary basis and the time they spend participating to the research meetings was recognised as in–service training by the institutions they were working for.

The empirical materials were collected by a team of four researchers — including the author — over a two–years period and the choice of methods to be adopted for data gathering reflected the following concerns.

The data were collected using research methods that were consistent with the aims of my study and that allowed to investigate both collective and individual dimension of teachers' constructions on professionalism. In

the first phase, focus groups were carried out with groups of approximately 10–12 teachers working within the same type of ECE institutions: focus groups were designed to provide relevant information on professional learning through the narratives of teachers' professional histories constructed collectively. In the second phase, teachers were asked to answer to a written interview designed to identify individual teachers' constructions of professionalism and their needs in relation to professional development. Therefore, the data collected through focus groups and written interviews not only seemed to offer pertinent answers to the research questions, but also seemed to be consistent with the aim of putting teachers' perceptions at the centre of the process of constructing knowledge on professionalism.

A systemic approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is informing the design of the study, therefore the issue of teachers' professionalism is investigated through three analytical levels: individual, institutional setting and social–cultural context. In this sense, the teachers' constructions of professionalism — which are placed at the very core of the research — are linked to the institutional aspects that contributed to form them and, at the same time, the institutional aspects affecting teachers' constructions of professionalism are put in relation to socio–cultural transformations that have contributed to develop them over time.

Therefore, the research presented in this volume is outlined as follow. The first level of analysis involved mapping the field of early childhood professionalism and professional development across three macro levels — national, regional and provincial — from 1968 up to date. At this stage, a critical analysis of relevant policy documents and socio–historical literature on the origin and transformation of ECE institutions was carried out in order to contextualise the study.(findings are reported in the first chapter) However, this first level of analysis was not only functional to the study contextualisation, but also contributed to identify elements and processes that informed the data interpretation on institutional aspects characterising different constructions of professionalism in different settings (as specified in the methodological considerations displayed in the second chapter). In fact, in order to examine the institutional aspects affecting teachers' perception of their professionalism within state, municipal and private faith ECE setting,– emerging from the second layer of analysis– the data collected through the focus groups and written interview were used contextually to the data drawn from the review of relevant policy documents (curriculum, regulations, guidelines, pedagogical projects, . . .). The third layer of analysis instead aimed at investigating teachers' (individual and collective) conceptualisations of professionalism by analysing phenomenographically the narratives constructed in the context of the focus groups and written interview (discussion of findings reported in the third and fourth chapter).

Finally, in the concluding chapter, the complex interactions and processes emerging from the analysis carried out across these three layers have been interpreted in the light of Freidson conceptual categories describing professionalism.