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Deconstructing Professionalism in Early Childhood Education: resisting the regulatory gaze

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ABSTRACT The aim of this article is to problematise the dominant construction of 'professionalism' as created and promoted by the United Kingdom Government through policy. Like other professionals working in education, early years practitioners are subjected to a disempowering, regulatory gaze in the name of higher standards. The preoccupation with satisfying dominant and externally imposed constructions of professionalism leaves little time to engage in meaningful critiques of the status quo, and as a consequence of social engineering those working in the early years become constrained by demands for technicist practice . The discourse of rationality is deconstructed to reveal that through its dominance and perpetuation early years practitioners are regulated and controlled in their attempts to satisfy the demands for performativity and technicist practice. This article draws upon and is framed by the work of Foucault, in particular his concern with 'disciplinary technologies' that produce docile bodies as objects that yield to the discourse, and his focus upon rules that govern the discourse – in this case the discourse professionalism. The article concludes with a discussion of the vital and important role that agency plays and it is argued that practitioners are not passively shaped by social structure but that they are active in challenging, negotiating and reforming the discourses through which they are positioned and defined and therein lies the possibility for resisting the regulatory gaze.

Introduction

Quite often 'professionalism' is presented as an apolitical and common-sense construct broadly defined by specialist knowledge/qualifications, meeting high standards, self-regulation and a high level of autonomy (see *Penguin English Dictionary*, 2000). I want to deconstruct common-sense definitions and to focus attention upon the cultural, historical and political specificity of the concept of professionalism in relation to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Professionalism in ECEC in the United Kingdom is currently a hot topic, attracting much debate and contention in the media, the academy and in Whitehall (government). There is widespread support for the potentially beneficial consequences of heightened professionalism for practitioners, and for the children and families that they serve. Advocates of the professionalism agenda believe that professionalisation could lead to a strengthened position and increased respect for those who work in ECEC, but concerns abound that a process of professionalisation could be used as a means of control and provide increased domination to those in power. Cannella (1997) is amongst many commentators to highlight the potential of a professionalism discourse to act as a mechanism for control wherein sites of power are created:

> the discourses and actions associated with professional institutions and practices have generated disciplinary and regulatory powers over teachers (who are mostly women) and children. Standards have been created through which individuals judge and limit themselves, through which they construct a desire to be 'good', 'normal' or both. (p. 137)

The 'Crisis' in Early Childhood Education and Care

In this vein I wish to draw attention to the ECEC situation in the United Kingdom. Aligned to the concerns above about a desire by the state for regulation; the early years workforce in the UK has attracted significant and increased attention from central government, the most recent and powerful manifestation of which is embodied in two key policy documents: *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004a, b) and the *Ten Year Strategy* (HM Treasury, DfES, 2005). Within these policies is a demonstrable intention to overhaul ECEC services to meet the economic and social needs of society. The policy documents are amongst a plethora of texts produced by and for the state which act as part of 'normalising technologies' whereupon authorities fix individuals in a web of objective codification (Foucault, 1978). This model of social engineering is characterised by regulation and control through a standards agenda and represents adherence to a mechanistic reductionist project, wherein those who represent the power elite (government departments and agencies) act as regulators of the behaviours of the subordinate (practitioners). The need to regulate and control stems from the discursive construct of a 'crisis in education'. Early childhood services are widely presented as failing to meet the needs of children and families and therefore the rationale for regulation is legitimated and a regulatory gaze deemed expedient and necessary. In this climate early years practitioners increasingly have to wrestle with demands for accountability, performativity and standardised approaches to their practice, all of which mark a pronounced movement towards centralised control and prescription, which poses a potential threat to professional autonomy and morale (Mahony & Hextall, 2000).

The hegemonic government professionalism discourse effectively silences alternative debates about what it means to be professional, how professionalism might look and the dangers of unreflexively accepting and adhering to an externally imposed normalised construction of professionalism; in essence, alternative counter-discourses become pathologised and marginalised (Novinger & O'Brien, 2003). Within a rapidly changing government policy context complete with intensification of workload, practitioners are left too busy and preoccupied with meeting standards to wrestle with their professional identities and how they might negotiate and construct their preferred commitment to 'being professional' as well as 'behaving professionally' in their work (Helsby, 1995).

Such developments in neo-liberal education policy have been accompanied by ongoing debates within the sociology of education about the consequences for practitioners' work and their identity. I argue that neo-liberal policy reforms have resulted in greatly reduced autonomy as a consequence of the regulatory gaze and accompanying directives and diktats. It is useful to draw attention to the 'proletarianisation thesis' (Ball, 1990; Maguire & Ball, 1994; Ozga, 2000; Avis, 2003) at this juncture, which asserts that as a consequence of policy reform, teachers have experienced an intensification of workload with an emphasis on technical competence and performativity. Within this thesis a paradox exists where centralising reforms have been presented as giving greater freedom but actually act to deregulate and then re-regulate, a process which Du Gay (1996) terms 'controlled de-control'. Within this context teachers are represented and encouraged to think of themselves as enterprising neo-liberal professionals (Walkerdine, 2003) yet they are managed according to an ideology of professionalism which has the effect of de- and then re-professionalising them (Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Ozga, 1995).

The proletarianisation thesis has been challenged for being overly deterministic because it emphasises a structural explanation, thereby denying a social constructionist account of 'professionalism' and providing only limited opportunities to engage in debates about personal agency. Nevertheless, I argue that appreciating structural explanations at the level of policy reform, the institutional power of education to transform society, and the discourse of professionalism to control an occupational group are keys to understanding 'professional identity' in the early years.

Yet the role personal agency can play is central to my argument in that the regulatory gaze can be, if not entirely resisted, at least negotiated/challenged. I, like other post-structural feminists (see Butler, 1990; Cannella, 1997; Francis, 1999, 2001) do not accept that individuals simply react to managerialist initiatives imposed upon them but they are active in reproducing, interpreting and transforming policy through action or agency. Although I suggest that in the context of ECEC in the United Kingdom, the ability to exercise agency is hampered by the heterogeneous composition of the sector characterised by a tapestry of private, voluntary and maintained provision, a situation

which renders a 'divide and rule' strategy entirely feasible for a government wishing to deliver a Scandinavian model of ECEC provision (Dahlberg et al, 1999) on taxes generated from a capitalist market economy (see comments by Norman Glass in the *Guardian*, 2005). This diversity in the range of provision encourages practitioners to behave in isolated and defensive ways (Osgood & Stone, 2002). As a consequence ECEC practitioners lack a unified identity or a shared belief in themselves as a 'professional' group.

Elsewhere, I have identified a 'passive resistance' amongst ECEC practitioners (Osgood, 2004) wherein an overt opposition to masculinist neo-liberal policy reforms which encourage competitive entrepreneurialism is evident, but so too are feelings of powerlessness and fatalistic resignation. Ball (2003) develops this idea further when he refers to an idea posited by Louise Morley about a 'form of ventriloquism', whereby educators can seem to be embodying or performing a given policy intention but they neither believe in it nor feel able to resist it. This concept is not unlike Judith Butler's (1990) notion of 'enacted fantasy' wherein practitioners feel compelled to cynically comply with demands for performativity. These concepts of 'passive resistance', 'forms of ventriloquism' and 'enacted fantasy' resonate with Foucauldian ideas about 'technicians of behaviour' (Foucault, 1978, p. 294) who become 'bodies that are docile and capable' (Foucault, 1980, p. 138).

Foucault's concern with the subject and power, as well as political rationality, are best illustrated in his use of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as a theoretical model to highlight the paradigm of a disciplinary technology. As an organisation of space and people, the Panopticon offered a visual order, which clarified the mechanisms of power being used. The ideas inherent within Bentham's scheme intended that the inmate remain isolated, individualised and constantly observed. The ingenious use of mirrors meant that in the absence of a guard, the power apparatus would continue to operate effectively and the inmate would behave as if surveillance was omnipresent; the reasoning was that if a prisoner was uncertain when a guard was observing, self-regulation would naturally occur.

This theoretical model can be applied to ECEC practitioners, who, through policy, workforce reform and concomitant objectifying practices of constant surveillance and the endeavour for normalised practice, find that the way in which power is exercised is largely invisible. But whether the power is opaque or visible, it is ultimately so sophisticated and seemingly abstract that it becomes impossible to challenge or negotiate. Thus, in a quest to conform to dominant constructions of professionalism, practitioners become regulated and controlled by disciplinary technologies of the self.

However, the above analysis is a pessimistic one, and I wish to offer a presentation of the ways in which agency and structure interact when considering the interplay between government policy, identity construction and competing definitions of professionalism. I recognise the tensions that exist between structure and agency and the power of certain discourses to become convincing and oppressive discursive truths. I want to propose that by recognising, identifying and problematising the hegemonic discourses through/in which practitioners are positioned, possibilities exist to develop critical consciousness and to challenge current self-understandings. As a consequence, the post-structural aim of establishing a space for new forms of subjectivity and resistance might be achieved.

The Power of Discourse and the Role of Agency

ECEC practitioners' subjectivity or 'way of being' comes about from an active engagement and negotiation of the discourses through which they are shaped and in which they are positioned. A purely structural analysis of ECEC in the United Kingdom attends to how practitioners are 'made subject' by the social order, but crucially it denies the possibility to examine how they act as agents/subjects within/against it. In this section I want to identify the discourses that government draws upon and creates to assert particular realities and priorities that are in stark polarity to those of practitioners. Bowe et al (1992) suggest that government policy is both text and discourse, and that through policy governments seek to establish a 'correct reading' or to promote certain discursive 'truths', in this instance around what it means to be professional in ECEC. Sinclair (1996) illustrates the persuasiveness and pervasiveness of a given discourse at a particular moment in time:

> People locate themselves in relation to certain discourses [which] reflect the socially sanctioned dominance of certain ideologies and subjugation of others. Because discourses vary in their authority at one particular time one discourse, such as managerialism or market approach seems 'natural' while another struggles to find expression in the way experience is described. (p. 232)

The naturalness of neo-liberal conceptualisations of professionalism has become embedded in the rhetoric of state agencies, for example, the range of government departments involved in devising the Ten Year Strategy (Departments for Trade and Industry, Work and Pensions and Education and Skills, DfES, 2005) resonates and re-instils the (problematic and unemancipatory—see Osgood, 2005) discourses of the Sure Start Unit (the national agency with responsibility for governing ECEC in the England). Gee et al (1996) describe the investment government makes in establishing and seeking to instil its preferred discursive truths:

> the new capitalism puts a great deal of faith in creating goals, core values, a vision, a culture – whatever one wants to call it (we would call it creating as Discourse) and communicating it to workers ... [it] is now quite open about the need to socialise people into 'communities of practice' that position people to be certain kinds of people. They now realise that they are in the business of creating and sustaining Discourses. (pp. 19-21)

Foucault (1972, 1980) conceptualises discourses as systems of statements, which construct objects and subjects within which the self positions, and is positioned through, interaction based upon a struggle for power. Because discourses are perpetuated by social structure and practices, the importance of deconstructing them lies in the possibilities available to provide alternate readings and examine the multiple and shifting subject positions. Foucault (1980) argued that through discursive positioning (the ability for discourses to construct both subjects and objects) the notion of power is embedded and therefore becomes possible to be positioned as powerful or not. Drawing on Foucault's ideas around discursive positioning through discourse, I want to turn to the prevailing hegemonic government discourse of rationality and the less powerful and hence marginalised discourse of emotionality in respect of practitioner professionalism in the early years.

The Discourse of Rationality and a Counter-discourse of Emotionality

Elsewhere I have drawn attention to the masculinist undertones of neo-liberalism and the economic rationale behind policy reform in the early years (Osgood, 2004, 2005). In recent policy reform, the UK Government continues to state its intention for early years practitioners to operate in entrepreneurial ways to adopt commercial approaches to management of provision (Sure Start Unit, 2004). I argue that neo-liberal discourse places an emphasis upon being rational above an ethic of care. The pressure to develop individualistic self-interest in a quest to demonstrate an entrepreneurial self is unbefitting and largely unwelcome (Osgood, 2003) in the female-dominated context of ECEC, where emotional labour is undertaken and the work characterised by an ethic of care (Lowe, 1998). In neo-liberal discourses there is little room for emotionality or such feminine characteristics that are seemingly unquantifiable or auditable. Janet Moyles (2001) discusses the problematic relationship that exists between dominant constructions of professionalism and the inherently and necessarily emotional nature of working in ECEC:

> It seems impossible to work effectively with very young children without the deep and sound commitment signified by the use of words like 'passionate'. Yet this very symbolisation gives a particular emotional slant to the work of early childhood practitioners which can work ... against them in their everyday roles and practices, bringing into question what constitutes professionalism and what being a 'teacher' means. (p. 81)

Emotions are a necessary quality in ECEC; the nature of the work involves strong feelings towards protecting and supporting children and engaging with a child's family and wider community (Katz, 1995) and supporting and caring for colleagues. An extensive body of literature has established that emotions are vital and essential to providing good quality provision to young children (Edwards et al, 1998; Friere, 1999; Claxton, 1999; Nias, 1999; Vogt, 2002). Practitioners make considerable personal and collective investments in contributing to and achieving a culture of care characterised by affectivity, altruism, self-sacrifice and conscientiousness. In attempts to 'do' emotional labour

this occupational group become self-regulated by it; they strive to achieve this internally ascribed construction of expertise/professionalism in the interests of the children in their care and in the belief that this is the most professionally appropriate model of practice (see Colley, this issue).

Yet, such attempts are denigrated and dismissed as unprofessional and therefore in need of reform. The neo-liberal construction of professionalism values masculinised attributes (such as rationality, competitiveness, individualism) which run counter to the beliefs and practices of most ECEC practitioners, and this, Ball (1990) argues, poses a direct threat to the professional integrity that practitioners seek to maintain:

> beliefs are no longer important, it is output that counts. Beliefs are part of an older, increasingly displaced discourse. Teachers (of the old order) seek to hold onto knowledges about themselves which diverge from prevailing categories. (p. 223)

I argue that the emotional labour ECEC practitioners engage in engenders fear in government because it is perceived as hyper-feminine and therefore unmanageable, unquantifiable and hence impossible for the state to regulate. So through a 'discourse of derision' and by unleashing 'the terrors of performativity' (Ball, 1990) practitioners come to question and doubt established and preferred practices. The increased and increasing demands for ECEC practitioners to demonstrate (measurable) competence results in professional judgement being subordinated to the demands of performativity. Within recent policy documents and legislative reform (*Every Child Matters: change for children* [DfES, 2004a]; *Every Child Matters: next steps* [DfES, 2004b]; the *Ten Year Strategy* [DfES, 2005]; and the *Children Act* [DfES, 2004c]) a construction of professionalism is promoted that values rationality, and there are indications that increased disciplinary and regulatory powers over practitioners will ensue. For example, the Children's Workforce Strategy (Her Majesty's Government, 2005) states, 'over time, the children's workforce could change considerably as the impact of our reforms comes through ... there are systemic problems which mean too often there is a lack of clarity about responsibilities and accountability' (p. 6). Within the strategy are proposals for a Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce, a Common Assessment Framework, an accompanying Framework for Inspection, and the creation of a Children's Workforce Development Council. These different measures will bring heightened additional standards against which practitioners must demonstrate their competence and professionalism. The current reform agenda creates a situation whereby individuals increasingly judge and limit themselves to a normalised and conformist construction of professionalism – a construction with little space for emotion.

Increased state regulation and top-down policy prescription represents a direct suppression of existing (and potential) counter-discourses, which become marginalised and devalued. The state-driven professionalism agenda, as set out in recent government policy documents, presents an attractive and seductive opportunity to raise the status and prestige of ECEC. However, in succumbing to this seduction practitioners run the risk of becoming preoccupied with assessment, accreditation, targets, accountability and performativity in attempts to demonstrate professional competence, but as colleagues Novinger & O'Brien (2003) warn, such a preoccupation blocks genuine reform because the focus is placed squarely upon the technical-rational model, whereby the externally prescribed regulations and standards define what it means to 'be professional'.

A direct consequence of this situation for practitioners is a double-bind of oppression. On the one hand, the established model of professionalism in ECEC, characterised by high emotion and a culture of care and nurturance, has little exchange value (Skeggs, 2003) in society; holding on to these qualities necessarily means that ECEC cannot satisfy dominant definitions of professionalism because it is a masculinist construct, and to retain this model of professionalism places the occupational group in stasis. On the other hand, attractive and beguiling opportunities available through a top-down professionalisation agenda have become available. To an occupational group that has historically received little policy attention and even less financial support to deliver high quality provision, temptation is strong. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article, neo-liberal reforms carry high costs, and pose a considerable threat to professional autonomy and wisdom.

Resisting the Regulatory Gaze

In recognising the disciplinary technologies inherent within policy reform, practitioners have an opportunity to take advantage of the 'tactical polyvalence' (Foucault, 1983) of discourses and practices, and to develop oppositional strategies and new forms of experience. Foucauldian theory provides a framework for understanding how we can be positioned and position ourselves in constantly shifting discourses. It can be considered a liberating theory when power is seen as embedded in discourse and the concept of a 'fixed self' is denunciated; for feminists post-structural theory highlights the complexity of gender relations and demonstrates a fresh way of understanding discourse and hence power relations, enabling an understanding of how power within a discourse is constituted and providing possibilities for creating new discourses through which the individual can become reconstituted, or, as Foucault (1983) puts it:

> Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of a 'political double bind', which is the simultaneous individualisation and totalisation of modern power structures. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state, and from the type of individualisation that is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed upon us. (p. 216)

Feminists have taken up this challenge and applied/developed Foucauldian concepts to create counter-discourses to destabilise established/dominant constructions and confuse, or open space for alternative identity constructions, leading to enhanced self-esteem and individual empowerment. Francis (2001) illustrates the problematic interplay between feminism as a modernist grand narrative, agency as an ability to proactively make decisions and resist oppression, and post-structuralist theories which promote the idea of power through discourses wherein the individual lacks agency. She resolves this tension by illustrating a 'new agency' perspective of the self, which incorporates both deterministic structural arguments and human agency. She argues that as well as positioning ourselves and others through discourse we are simultaneously being positioned by others, and that such positioning is beyond our control, so that:

> the self incorporates both contradiction and consistency; is constructed by the self and by others; and has agency but is also determined by discursive material forces. This account is flexible, able to incorporate the contradictory and complex nature of human interaction and power relations. (Francis, 2001, p. 166)

This model of 'new agency' offers a useful framework to aid an understanding of the positioning of ECEC practitioners in a policy reform context and to reflect upon the highly problematic and politicised construction of professionalism. The salience of this model is evidenced in research I have undertaken with practitioners about the in/appropriateness of entrepreneurialism with the ECEC context (Osgood, 2003). ECEC providers consistently drew upon discourses around non-competitive collaboration, altruism, community spirit and voluntary self-sacrifice, leading me to argue that a counter-discourse existed which could be used effectively to oppose the dominant construction of professionalism as commercially oriented (Osgood, 2004). My own subject position as a feminist researcher means that I apply certain constructions of self and reality to the research process, and as such I present only one version of many possible 'truths' when seeking to understand the positionality and experiences of ECEC practitioners in a policy context.

As I have outlined in this article, the masculinist, neo-liberal project of de- and re-professionalising ECEC practitioners relies upon the propagation and enculturation of certain discursive truths. I present an alternative reading, drawing upon the experiences of ECEC practitioners in research I have undertaken to demonstrate that an alternative set of 'truths' relating to 'professionalism' in ECEC exists. Thus far I have argued that an ethic of care and emotional labour are cornerstones to practitioners' professional identities and that these characteristics are denigrated in hegemonic professionalism discourses. I have also argued that in establishing an alternative construction of professionalism, one that acknowledges the unique nature and complexity of the work that ECEC practitioners do, then resistance to an imposed and

inappropriate definition might be possible. So where currently ECEC practitioners are positioned in a discourse of derision (Ball, 1990) when the hegemonic government construction of 'professionalism' is applied, a counter-positioning is possible when a definition is sought from within, using an emancipatory feminist framework. Such a project is, of course, not without challenges; in a struggle to redefine and establish a counter-discourse practitioners will find their expert knowledge vulnerable to scrutiny. Sachs (2001) argues that 'professional identity' refers to a set of externally ascribed characteristics used as a means of differentiation. However, by adopting Francis's (2001) model of 'new agency' it becomes possible to conceive of professional identity in different ways, in ways that see it as a negotiated, ambiguous and shifting entity mediated by personal experience, beliefs and values about what it means to be an ECEC professional and the type of professional an individual aspires to be.

A number of commentators (Noddings, 1993; Claxton, 1999; Moyles, 2001) argue that to achieve professional status in ECEC, practitioners are required to exercise reflection, professional knowledge, self-esteem and confidence. These authors suggest that female practitioners lack such qualities because they become convinced that they are too emotional and powerless against (male) authority, such that they become insecure about their professional standing and distrust/underestimate their professional insights, or as Weiler (1988) states, 'it is the internalisation of male hegemony that leads women to devalue their own worth' (p. 89). So how can practitioners construct counter-discourses? How can an oppressed occupational groups retain self-belief and confidence in their practice?

Being Reflexive and Developing the 'Professional' Self

If it is accepted that professionalism is socially constructed, then the role practitioners play in that construction, and the ways in which control is resisted and/or accepted is key to this debate. I argue that increased participation in education and training that encourages critical reflexivity (of both the self as subject and the objectifying practices that situate the self through and within discourse) is crucial to establishing the foundations of an internally constructed counter-discourse. Through research I have undertaken I see clear evidence of practitioners in the United Kingdom engaging in a wide range of professional development activities with dedication and commitment, with the explicit aim of improving professional practice and self-confidence (Osgood & Stone, 2002; Osgood, 2003). However, subscribing to and participating in professional development activity is by no means simple or unproblematic; it is important to recognise the very real financial and emotional costs that engaging in further and higher levels of study present to many practitioners, who find their classed and gendered identities are troubled by the experience (Osgood, 2005).

Questions also have to be asked of the quality and focus of training available to practitioners. In referring to professional development activities, I focus upon those designed to enable a greater self-awareness and improved self-confidence, not merely those with the aim of satisfying the prevailing credentialism agenda in the neo-liberal education marketplace (Reay, 2001). I am promoting activities which enable practitioners to develop and extend their expert knowledge and wisdom (Goodfellow, 2004) and to critically appraise, not just themselves as professionals, but the social and political context within which they are located. In the pursuit of a counter-discourse, practitioners need to find space to retain their professional integrity, experiential wisdom (Feldman, 1997), their belief in an ethic of care and the importance of emotion, and to find the will to problematise and reject the status quo and hegemonic constructions of professional practice in ECEC. Dale (1981) identified the importance of 'professional confidence' to enable practitioners to impose their own interpretations of government policy, and to balance its demands against other professional priorities and to exploit what remains of their 'licensed autonomy'. In summary, I am proposing that education and training that goes beyond the demonstration of technical competence to provide an opportunity for critical reflection and consciousness raising will enable practitioners to assess how they are positioned and the ways in which they might actively reposition themselves in competing and alternative discourses of professionalism.

A Project in Reconceptualising Professionalism

Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (1990), I argue that a professional identity is performatively constituted; 'being professional' is a performance, which is about what practitioners *do* at particular times, rather than a universal indication of *who they are*. Certain cultural configurations of professional identity have seized a hegemonic hold (they have become normalised in our culture, see Sawaki, 1994, for further discussion) but I propose that through exercising subversive action it is possible to mobilise and confuse dominant constructions and present an alternative, counter-discourse of professionalism. Butler's idea of identity as free floating, and not connected to essentialised ideas about who we are but rather a performance (of professionalism) offers the opportunity to chose to perform professionalism differently and therefore challenge and unsettle established understandings. However, I argue that Butler's position overstates the discursively constituted self, and point to the work of various post-structuralist feminists who have wrestled with the concept of identity construction: Davies & Banks (1992), Skeggs (1997), Reay (2001), Reay (1998) and Francis (2001, 2002). The London Feminist Salon Collective (Francis and Archer, 2004) theoretically construct the self as positional, positioned and self–other positioning, thereby recognising the self as both discursively and structurally produced. In viewing discourse as something that is actively chosen by subjects, thereby retaining an element of human agency (choice) and structure (subject as positioned and actively positioning the self and others in available discourses), ECEC practitioners have at their disposal an opportunity to subvert and resist prevailing and dominant understandings of their professionalism.

In conclusion, I suggest that opportunities exist for the range of 'professionals' working in ECEC (including academics, researchers, educators, and grass-roots practitioners) to develop further understandings of how discourses operate and the ways in which we use them, in order that we might engage in projects designed to reconfigure, resist and subvert them. In so doing possibilities for transformative agency may arise so that through subjugated experiences agency becomes reformulated as enactments of variation within regulated, normative, habitual processes of signification. The assertive, self-assured and wise ECEC professional who challenges the status quo, low pay, poor working conditions, and lack of respect can muddy the water and offer the chance of a reconfigured professional identity and counter-discourse. Foucault (1983) states that all discourses are dangerous, especially without continued examination; it is this continued examination and critical reflection which is vital to establishing a reconceptualised understanding of what it means to be professional in ECEC.

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