The Professionalization of Children's Services in Australia

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The Professionalization of Children’s Services in Australia

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Abstract

This article examines the concept and practice of the ‘professionalization’ of children’s services in Australia, emphasizing the importance of gender, skills and regulation. Children’s services practitioners have difficulty in reaching professional status – broadly defined. Tertiary-level training and credentials alone are insufficient as the expertise of the work in centre-based services is not ‘socially sanctioned’. The coexistence of family day care diminishes the status of centre-based workers. To achieve professional status a clear delineation between less formal child care arrangements and domestic parenting is required. This process demands the use of new titles for employees, their workplace and their tasks. In addition, practitioner labour must have scarcity value by excluding the untrained and unqualified from centre-based employment.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, gender, occupational closure, professional status, regulation, skill

While the sociology of professions literature is vast, a useful starting point in a discussion of professionalization is Harold Wilensky’s (1964) much cited article ‘The professionalization of everyone?’ He argued – in part – that professions are specialist occupations offering stable employment that apply ‘theory’ so there is a distinction between ‘the lay public’ and the occupational group with the monopolization of recognized skills. In addition, professionals adhere to ‘a set of professional norms’ which give priority to the interests of the ‘client’ over personal or commercial interests (Wilensky, 1964: 138–40). He suggested occupations engaged in ‘human relations’ (e.g. ‘child care’) have difficulty in satisfying the first criterion.
because the ‘lay public cannot recognize the need for special competence in an area where everyone is “expert” ’ (Wilensky, 1964: 145). The monopolization of skills or claims to an ‘exclusive jurisdiction’ of skills and knowledge will be weakened if an occupation uses ‘a vocabulary that sounds familiar to everyone’ (Wilensky, 1964: 148). He cautioned, therefore, the professionalization of everyone is ‘sociological romance’ because some occupations have a too vague or general knowledge base, while others are too commercial (Wilensky, 1964: 157). Wilensky’s relatively uncomplicated categorization of a profession appears to have been endorsed by Professions Australia, an umbrella organization of professional associations, who define a profession as ‘... a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards ... and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills ...’ (Professions Australia, 1997). This article examines the concept and practice of the ‘professionalization’ of the prior-to-school centre-based sector of children’s services in Australia (long day care) by applying Wilensky’s framework.

The Australian Senate Committee’s ‘Inquiry into the Provision of Child Care in Australia’ (Senate Committee Report, 2009) highlights perceptions of, and aspirations regarding, the status of the Australian ‘child care’ industry. In evidence before the Senate Committee one witness remarked: ‘[There is] is a real problem in terms of the professional esteem or lack of it. ... It is a profession. We are using terminology like “care workers”. ... We need to use the terminology of “early childhood professionals” or “practitioners” ... It is just letting them [staff] know that what they are in is a profession’ (Senate Committee Hansard, 7 August 2009: 40). French, Sumison and Shepherd (2010: 90–91) argue the fragmentation of formal ‘child care’ arrangements in Australia augurs against consensus about the appropriate use of the term ‘professional’, for its widespread designation could result in a ‘deprofessionalising’ of university degree qualified early childhood education teachers. Conversely, if the term is restrictively applied to only university graduates it could be viewed as exclusionary and/or perpetuating gendered and power-based constructs of professionalization (Simpson, 2010).

There is dispute – if not confusion – regarding definitions of ‘early childhood education and care’, and therefore who and what constitute ‘early childhood’ or ‘children’s services’ workers (Woodrow, 2007: 233). Particular language and terms adds to this confusion, and also adds to the uncertainty about specific roles and responsibilities of workers (McGillivary, 2008: 244). French and colleagues argue that despite long day care centres in Australia delivering educational programs to children there is a strong community perception centres only provide ‘care’ to the children of parents seeking or engaged in paid work (French, Waniganayake and Fleet, 2009: 201). For instance, terms used in the prior-to-school children’s services context such as early childhood, early childhood education, early education, early years education, preschool education, child development,
and child care might be accurate terms for the respective practitioner, regulatory and geographical contexts. However, this diversity of language can confuse both industry ‘insiders’ and society about the appropriate nomenclature to be applied to workers: are they teachers, educators, pedagogues, providers, practitioners, or caregivers?

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2006), ‘care’ is concerned with young children’s health and nutrition, and their evolving emotional and social abilities; ‘development’ is concerned with the process of change in which children master increasing complex levels of moving, thinking, feeling and interacting with people and objects in the environment; and ‘learning’ is concerned with the process of children acquiring knowledge, skills, habits and values through experience and experimentation, observation, reflection, and/or study and instruction. In order to simplify the discussion, this article uses the expression ‘children’s services’ to denote the activities of long day care centres in Australia because they supply ‘care’, ‘development’ and ‘learning’ to prior-to-school aged children, as defined by the OECD. Moreover, this term is consistent with the currently operating national employment regulatory instrument, the Children’s Services Award 2010 (MA000120), designating a worker in a long day care centre as a ‘children’s services employee’. The academic and practitioner field related to this type of children’s services is termed ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC). These expressions are used to differentiate workers employed in day care centres from social workers in government agencies, residential social workers, family support workers and the like, and as a means to clarify the identity, status and jobs performed by ‘children’s services employees’.

The issues raised by the 2009 Australian Senate report regarding the ‘professional’ status or otherwise of children’s services employees are not unique to Australia (e.g. Osgood, 2006a). Since the 1970s the Australian children’s services ‘industry’ has achieved recognition with occupational-specific formal training and qualifications and industrial recognition with award regulation. Despite concessions by employers in the 1990s that trained and qualified staff are required in centre-based services – partly due to state regulation – the dominance of profit-oriented employers in recent times accentuates the struggle for social recognition as a ‘profession’. In the 2006 report Pathways to a Profession, one children’s services stakeholder observed: ‘We are an industry in crisis. Society assumes that it’s OK for young children to be cared for by people with minimum qualifications but also expects a high standard of care’ (Watson, 2006: 48). The commercial for-profit children’s services employers are more than willing to stress their employees are ‘professionals’, and vigorously publicise the training and qualifications of staff, when it adds to their marketing and business requirements (e.g. ABC Learning, 2006: 7). Yet, when it comes to industrial recognition of staff as professionals, the same employers diminish the importance
of training, qualifications, skill and practitioner autonomy (Australian Childcare Centres Association, 2006: 21).

This article seeks to move beyond critique of the sociology of professions and identifying problems in the professionalization of prior-to-school children’s services in Australia by proffering policy action alternatives. Given the diversity and importance of the issues connected with the professionalization of an occupation in general, and their relevance for children’s services in particular, this article cannot address all such issues. Rather, we examine the main themes discussed by Wilensky (1964): legal and ethical responsibility for practice as a reflection of the values of children’s services; occupational monopoly over its knowledge and practice jurisdiction; and expertise based on abstract knowledge of non-routine tasks. First, the article briefly overviews the sociology of professions literature, noting the problematic application to feminized occupations generally, and ECEC in particular. Next, the article highlights the caution needed when using official measures of ‘skill levels’ in Australia to assess the extent to which they give a realistic indication of children’s services being a profession or otherwise, and notes the dissimilarities with home-based child care providers (family day care). In the main part of the article, occupational control, occupational autonomy and occupational closure are discussed, suggesting the evidence for the professionalization of children’s services is ambiguous. Here it is argued use of language and specific terms, labels and expressions play a large part in mistaking error for truth that the work of long day care staff is simply ‘child-minding’ notwithstanding the educational qualifications of workers. This error is also shaped by the close attitudinal proximity of home-based family day care providers with centre-based children’s services employees, despite their obvious regulatory, knowledge base and performance differences. In short, notwithstanding the social and economic policy, labour market and community responsibilities thrust upon workers it was/is in not in the interests of governments, families or employers (largely due to funding, costs and wage implications) to advance the status of children’s services staff and their labour (Morgan, 2005). While these vested interests are considerable obstacles to achieving professional status, professionalization ‘from within’ an occupation (manipulation of product and labour markets) is an alternative to professionalization ‘from above’ (largesse of forces external to the occupation) as they are two distinct approaches resulting two distinct forms of professionalization (Evetts, 2003: 409–10).

Professions, professionalization and gender

What occupations constitute a ‘profession’ and what processes convert an occupation into a profession (i.e. professionalization) are in dispute (West, 1998: 14). Indeed, the search for a universal definition of ‘professionalism’
has been criticised for its reliance on semantic nuances without due consideration to the cultural, technical and institutional environment. This frame of analysis often results in ‘check-list’ approaches to identify which occupations are professions and those that are not (Bolton and Muzio, 2008: 284). Such check lists can include the ‘trait’ notion of professions (professional work has different characteristics from non-professional work), the ‘functionalist’ notion of a profession (how the work is viewed and defined by non-practitioners), and the presence or absence of some form of occupational closure to limit the type and number of practitioners (Evetts, 2003: 399–407). However, there appears to be a consensus that autonomy or control by practitioners over the content – if not the conditions – of their work is necessary (but not sufficient) for an occupation to claim the status of a profession (Roach Anleu and Mack, 2008: 185–86). In other words, the more recent discourse in the sociology of professions dispute the concept that professionals can be comprehended in terms of a general model: ‘professionalism is neither inevitable, universal nor of any single type’ (West, 1998: 15).

Glazer (1991) questions much of sociology of professions literature for largely reflecting masculine concepts and/or related values and experiences. Citing nursing as an example, she contends there are different understandings of patient care to that exercised by male-dominated medical practice (Glazer, 1991: 325). Similarly, Davis (1996: 668–72) argues many of the traditional characteristics of a profession were developed when the dominant ‘actors’ were men, and thus were influenced by cultural notions of masculinity, and reflected in the emotional detachment of the professional from the ‘client’. Hence, non-traditional, if not feminist, approaches to patient and other forms of ‘caring’ are perceived as incompetence. Consequently, acknowledging what is generally considered to be the professionalization process is gendered (i.e. masculine) is needed in order to develop more comprehensive frameworks for the sociology of professions (Davis, 1996: 671–73; see also Osgood, 2006c). Failure to recognise the gendered nature of professionalization can leave female-dominated occupations caught in a vicious cycle; being emotional is unprofessional behaviour, yet mimicking masculine behaviour can reinforce gendered hierarchies (Lively, 2001: 360–62; Lyons et al., 2005). However, Bolton and Muzio (2008: 282) suggest there may be ‘problematic and contradictory’ aspects of professional projects of feminized workforces.

Analysis of prior-to-school children’s services cannot be comprehended without an appreciation of gender, and the gendered aspects of the historical, regulatory, and political contexts of the work, the workplace and skills. Care and nurturing are skills that are rewarded inside the industry, yet tend to be devalued by people outside the industry. With ‘emotional labour’ being a key competency for working with young children (Murray, 1998), it generates tensions with the traditional conceptualisation of
professionalism (Osgood, 2006c: 190–91). Saraceno (1984: 20) argues staff often seek to avoid the ‘feminine vocation trap’ by focusing on the more formal child development and educational aspects of their work. This care/education dichotomy can be interpreted as a manifestation of Merton’s (1972) ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ doctrines. The attachment to the emotional labour of child ‘care’ by insiders is overly influenced by the customs and habits of a highly sex-skewed, female-dominated, workforce which only reinforces an ascribed rather than achieved status. Therefore, employing outsiders (men) may allow for a more appropriate degree of emotional distance and detachment from young children with a greater emphasis on development and learning, resulting in an achieved and not an ascribed status. Osgood (2006b: 9) contests this understanding of gender influences due to the dominant, external, concept of professionalization being a masculinist construct, while the prevailing, internal, notion of professionalism is characterized by high emotion and a culture of care and nurturance. Although, Lyons and colleagues recognize there are a range of justifications amongst proponents of a greater male staff presence in children’s services and even ongoing debate about whether more men should be employed, they concede the potential labour market economics advantages of additional male employment in children’s services might be accompanied with an increased status of the labour (Lyons et al., 2005: 7). However, Cameron (2006) proffers the internal and external consequences of a more gender-balanced workforce are largely mutually exclusive. Greater status of children’s services labour and employing more male workers can be seen as independent trends as there is no necessary relationship between the two: it is possible to recruit more men and not ‘professionalize’ and it is possible to ‘professionalize’ and retain a highly sex-skewed workforce.

**Family day care and skills**

One of the more recent developments in Australian child care arrangements is the establishment of home-based child care or family day care. The growth of family day care took precedence over the development of centre-based services for much of the 1980s and 1990s because it was less costly for government to fund than long day care, it could be developed more rapidly due to its very limited building and capital requirements, and it was believed to be more suitable for very young children (children under two years of age) for whom many centres did not provide places owing to the extra costs of lower child-to-staff ratios (Davis, 1983: 83). Some policy makers see no difference in the nature and type of service provided by family day care and long day care (Karvelas, 2010). This attitude may be influenced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (ABS) measure of
The ANZSCO classifies the occupation ‘family day carer’ at skill level 4, the same skill level as centre-based ‘child care workers’ (ABS, 2006: 488–89). A problem in constructing an occupational skills hierarchy is measuring ‘skill’. Thus, one measure used to determine the skill level of an occupation is the proportion of the occupational category with a relevant post-school qualification. The most recent Census of Child Care Services (2008) shows: 61 percent of centre-based staff had a formal and relevant qualification; 21 percent at bachelor degree level (generally a teaching or education degree); and 40 percent at Certificate III level or higher. Of the 39 percent with no qualification, a quarter of these (11 percent of all workers) were studying for a qualification (Census of Child Care Services, 2008: 46–7). The Census data show the proportion of staff with a qualification is steadily rising. Although family day care providers are classified at the same skill level as ‘child care workers’, they have considerably less formal qualifications: 69 percent had no qualification, 14 percent had a Certificate III or higher, and only six percent were studying for a qualification (Census, 2008: 72–3). Put simply, centre-based children’s service workers are part of an occupational category (ANZSCO unit group 4211 child carers; ABS, 2006) that also includes many unqualified staff therefore diluting the proportion of the category with a relevant qualification (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1995: 46–7). The current vocational education and training package applicable for centre-based children’s services, Community Services (CHC08), contains the following qualifications: CHC30402 Certificate III in Children’s Services; CHC50302 Diploma of Children’s Services (Early childhood education and care); and CHC60202 Advanced Diploma of Children’s Services.

The ‘professionalization’ of children’s services?

Both the academic and practitioner sections of the ECEC field rely on developmental psychology as a means to be externally perceived (and to enhance self-perceptions) as professionals (Ailwood, 2007). The ongoing debate over the care and education dichotomy, particularly in relation to educational and developmental programs (Macfarlane and Lewis, 2004), and the fragmentation of the workforce into either ‘early education’ or ‘child care’ (Moss, 2006: 31) appear to support Taffe and Barnes’ (2009) claim children’s services in Australia still have unresolved issues of authority, autonomy and subjection. While in some respects children’s services conforms to Freidson’s (1986) ‘folk concept’ of a profession (a knowledge-base that is largely abstract yet capable of practical implementation), other aspects of the folk concept are difficult to detect: organisation by the occupation to control ‘professional’ activity and occupational closure determined by educational credentials, for example.
A set of professional norms?

The degree to which the occupation visits some measure of ‘control’ or autonomy over the work of employees is perhaps the most contradictory element of the professionalization process of children’s services in Australia and could lead to two conflicting conclusions. According to Osgood (2006c: 188) regulation of performance standards results in mere ‘technical competence and performativity’. Indeed, technical competence can be viewed as traditional (masculine) professionalism, whereas other work-related practices are relegated to feminised non-professional work (Bolton and Muzio, 2008: 292–95). However, Giddens (1979, as cited in Osgood, 2006c) notes the mutually interdependence of an occupation’s values and professional ambitions with the social structure in which the occupation is located. Therefore, it is possible to argue that long day care has a ‘self-regulating’ process that seeks to maintain the practicing standards of the industry; the accreditation system (known as the Child Care Quality Assurance under the Howard government) of the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC). Through the process of individual or internal assessment and peer review the system attempts to bring about the quality and standards of children’s services practice expected by the community (Wangmann, 1995). Thus, the self-regulation of the industry is willing to concede that poor performance exists.

Owing to the social construction of the concept of professionalization, practitioners can play a role in shaping this construction. Here, collective identities can be an important aspect of challenging externally imposed limitations on practitioner autonomy (Osgood, 2006c: 194–96). Arguably, having the industrial interests of most centre-based children’s services workers represented by a trade union with coverage for predominantly low paid workers (see Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers’ Union, 2008) rather than a teacher or education industry union is not conducive to be perceived as a profession (Macfarlane and Lewis, 2004). So, perhaps uncharitably, aspirations to be a profession and to be recognized as professionals are an individual and collective mechanism to cope with the unprofessional way children’s services workers have been or are treated by industrial regulators, governments, many employers and even parents (e.g. Lively, 2001; but see Healy, 2009: 404–9). In short, the lack of a single ‘professional’ organization to articulate issues associated with occupational practice and standards and advocate practitioner wants and desires illustrates control of the shape and direction of the industry is not done by the workforce (Rosier and Lloyd-Smith, 1996: 39).

Attempts have been made to address this lack of collective identity through, for instance, the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) ‘code of ethics’. A code of ethics can encourage professional values unique to prior-to-school early childhood contexts that are separate to those in the infants and primary school sectors (Woodrow, 2007: 234). However, this process is of
limited value. At worst it can be criticized because it is a device to self-ordain professional status. Furthermore, for codes of ethics to have any meaningful purpose, both for practitioners and the community, they need to be both enforceable and enforced. Breaches of the ECA's code do not attract sanctions from those within the industry because the code is ‘owned by the field, rather than imposed upon it’. Moreover, a standard of individual practice – as opposed to a centre’s practice that is evaluated by the accreditation system – has difficulty in identifying just who is the ‘client’ of the children’s services practitioner: is the client the child, the parent, the owner or operator of the long day care centre, or the funding authority? (Dally, 2008).

**An exclusive jurisdiction?**

While the notion professions capture, develop and exercise unique bodies of knowledge (be that ‘abstract’, ‘complex’ ‘esoteric’ or ‘specialized’) is generally uncritically examined in the sociology of professions (West, 1998: 3), with children’s services having gained a foot-hold, if it is not already firmly established, in tertiary institutions the foundations of professionalism are, according Freidson (1986: xii), in place: ‘Professions are those occupations that have in common credentials testifying to some degree of higher education and that are prerequisites for holding jobs. Higher education presupposes exposure to a body of formal knowledge, a professional “discipline” ’. Raising the proportion of staff with relevant qualifications and higher level qualifications especially has a number of industry and social benefits: standards of practice and therefore quality will increase (Senate Committee Report, 2009: 51), and qualifications offer the community some form of protection against incompetent practitioners (Brint, 1993: 273). Yet for expertise to be sanctioned by the community a high degree of incompetence by non-practitioners is required. The role played by formal qualifications and credentials in this context is that they induce trust in the expertise of the practitioner, and that only those with the credentials can assess the expertise of their peers rather than ‘outsiders’. In light of the close connection of the work found in long day care with the domestic world of child-rearing in the family home and the persistent call by many employers for the continued employment of unqualified children’s services workers, the fear of incompetent practitioners demanded to sanction the expertise, status, and authority of qualified staff as ‘professionals’ is not forthcoming (Beckman, 1990: 128).

The expertise of the work found is long day care (with the possible exception of degree-qualified staff) is not ‘socially sanctioned’ expertise. The gap between how staff and industry ‘insiders’ view children’s services and how the community as a whole views the work and occupations is largely based on socially sanctioned authority (Beckman, 1990: 123). Indeed, submissions to the Senate Committee inquiry argued ‘experience’,
‘maturity’ and ‘motherliness’ are the essential traits needed and not necessarily qualifications (Senate Committee Report, 2009: 53). While this might be a minority view, the history of the industrial regulation of employees in long day care centres in Australia illustrates there are vested interests in restricting the educational dimension of prior-to-school children’s services in order to minimise labour costs (French, Waniganayake and Fleet, 2009: 203–4; Smith and Lyons, 2006). The so called care/education divide has assisted these vested interests, as has the use of particular language and expressions (Woodrow, 2007: 237–39).

A major obstacle to improve the status of children’s services via professional closure strategies is the close association of the work in long day care to the ‘every day’ tasks of child-rearing. The formal qualifications attainable from educational institutions have only partly addressed this. The debate over the most appropriate qualification and the level of theoretical and practical expertise applicable to long day care is one that even practitioners are yet to agree upon amongst themselves. Therefore, it should not be unexpected that the community is yet to be fully convinced that academic training is necessary or the duration and content of any training (Moran, 2000: 17). Furthermore, the ability of non-qualified staff to gain employment in children’s services, despite some degree of state regulation over the potential children’s services labour market – such as the New South Wales (NSW) Children’s Services Regulation 2004 – only adds to the confusion regarding the necessity of formal credentials for centre-based employment. However, this feature of professional closure has recently been addressed in Queensland as a qualification at Certificate III level or higher for all positions is now mandatory under the Child Care Act and Division 3 of the Child Care Regulation 2003. The need for occupational closure is accepted by the Council of Australian Governments’ National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care, where by January 2014 all staff are required to have – or be in the process of obtaining – a recognized and relevant qualification (either at degree or diploma/certificate III level) (French, Sumsion and Shepard, 2010: 90).

A vocabulary that sounds familiar to everyone?

Few, if any, ‘professionalised’ feminized occupations (e.g. nursing, social workers, teaching and the like) suffer from ambiguity due to their job title to the same extent as long day care workers (McGillivary, 2008: 252). According to Saunders (1981), occupational status can be identified by four elements and thus define workers’ position within the hierarchy of labour. First is the worker’s title which conveys a certain meaning and identity to the labour performed and the job occupant and how the work relates to similar activities. The second element is job content and tasks – can this be undertaken by merely anybody or does it require a certain type of worker? Third is the definition of the workplace – is the occupation
restricted to a particular type of workplace or can it be performed at a range of workplaces? Finally, there is the issue of social mobility – does the occupation allow some form of class/status mobility, which sends signals both about the job occupant and the occupation? Use of particular language helps shape ‘commonsense’ understandings of society, so changes in the language used can reframe social perceptions of occupational conduct, practices and associated policy. Therefore, the term ‘child care’ needs to be replaced with more accurate descriptions of the occupational practices of long day care workers in Australia in order to avoid simplistic associations with ‘child minding’ (Woodrow, 2007: 24). Moreover, terms such as child care reinforce perceptions working with very young children is ‘women’s work’ and not necessarily done by trained and qualified practitioners (McGillivary, 2008: 245). A change in the language used to describe both the job title and the workplace can alter social consciousness and even occupational status (Shpancer et al., 2008). Although Crook (1997) indicates new types of work coupled with formal education results in both increased social mobility and access to professional status, this need not be the case if skill and status levels diminish when public (market) sphere activities become indistinguishable from private (non-market) sphere activities.

Here, the coexistence of family day care side-by-side with centre-based children’s services, we suggest, diminishes the status of long day care workers and their labour. For example, the ABS describes the general duties of a ‘child care worker’ as providing care and supervision for children in education and developmental programs, and the general duties of a family day care worker as providing care and supervision ‘for babies and children, usually in the carer’s own home’ (ABS, 2006: 488–89, emphasis added). The involvement of centre-based staff in education and developmental programs is important to differentiate them from family day care providers for it is a clear indication of their skill level. Under State government regulations family day care providers are not required to have formal relevant training, though the coordinator of the scheme needs a relevant early childhood qualification. For long day care, in contrast, regulations in most States demand at least one staff member be qualified in early childhood education (usually the centre director), specialist training if the centre caters for children under two years, and relevant qualifications for group or room leaders (Senate Committee Report, 2009: Chapter 5). Family Day Care Australia (2009) describe the service as care for other people’s children, and may include the provider’s own children, in the provider’s own home, and can include all-day care, overnight and weekend care, part-time, casual, before and after school care, and care during school holidays. This could equally describe informal child-minding. In addition, the method of payment for providers is similar to child-minding as it is based on the number of children under care, and not a wage or a salary (Brennan, 1994: 133). A study
of family day care providers found the ‘skills’ they regard as the most central to their role were those conventionally associated with ‘mothering’: the ability to be physically affectionate with children or to enable feelings of safety and security (Saggers et al., 1994: 278).

Moreover, the NCAC’s accreditation system has different standards for centre-based services and family day care. The six quality areas assessed for family day care include ‘learning and development’, and the standards are relatively uncomplicated requiring the provider to respond to, or guide, children’s behaviour (FDCQA Principles 3.1–3.6, see NCAC, 2007). The seven quality areas assessed for long day care are far more demanding on staff as they include ‘programming and evaluation’ and ‘children’s experiences and learning.’ With regards to learning and development, the standards for centre-based services require a considerable level of expertise including a distinct philosophy of early years learning and development, devising and planning each child’s program, and documenting each child’s progress (QIAS Principles 3.1-3.3, 4.1–4.6, see NCAC, 2007). These different accreditation standards help explain why family day care is considered to be a substitute mother by many parents, rather than viewing the provider as a trained and qualified ECEC practitioner (Hand, 2005).

In sum, the NCAC quality standards, state regulation of staff in long day care, and the tasks centre-based staff are expected to perform clearly differentiates centre-based services from family day care. However, the close attitudinal proximity of home-based services acts to reduce the mystique of ECEC labour and subsequently the occupation’s ability to protect their product market scarcity. The combination of these factors results in the low status assigned by many in society to ECEC. The labels ‘child care’ and ‘child care worker’ convey an implication about the work in long day care that it is similar to, if not a replication of, child-rearing conducted in the family home; thus it is assumed that the job content and tasks of centre-based staff can be performed by anybody, or more particularly by any woman. This perception is reinforced by the general understanding, advanced with government funding decisions, that family day care conducted by ‘carers’ in a family home and centre-based long day care largely supply the same service (Loane, 1997: 153–76; Noble, 2007; Senate References Committee, 1996: 62–4) and thus are utilized for largely the same reasons (ABS, 2009: 16).

**Conclusion**

While a ‘professional identity’ is externally ascribed, it is therefore an attitude which is negotiated, shifting and often ambiguous (Sachs, 2001 as cited in Osgood, 2006c: 194). The aspiration of many in the children’s services industry to obtain professional status could be used to support Wilensky’s (1964) disapproval of the ‘professionalization of everyone’, or
Evetts’s (2003) contention it is no longer important to draw a hard definitional line between professions and other occupations partly because even traditional professions owe accountability to externally imposed performance standards in order to demonstrate why continued public funding of their labour (be that direct or indirect) should be maintained. Australian centre-based children’s services as an occupation has undergone a noteworthy transformation commensurate with professionalization, specifically the separation from its charitable origins, where it now operates in a vigorous commercial market, and development of service-specific university and vocational education qualifications. Notwithstanding institutional recognition as an occupation with state regulation and industrial award coverage, there still persists among ECEC practitioners a perception that their status and the substance of their work are not sufficiently appreciated or acknowledged by governments, some employers and some elements of society. The continued use of the term ‘child care’ to describe their job title, workplace and the nature of the service is indicative of this low esteem. As a result a change to the term ‘children’s services’ to clearly differentiate centre-based services from less early years education and development focused and more social or recreational work-related child care (e.g. family day care, occasional care and school vacation care) would improve the understanding of what the industry and occupation actually does and does not do. Furthermore, the continuing debate regarding the differences (if any) between early years education and child developmental care, including the belief that only teacher-qualified staff understand how to ‘teach’, suggest the conditions for a new occupational identity is unfinished business and hence the professionalization process is incomplete. In his analysis of accounting as a profession, West (1998: 16) suggests ‘this profession’s technical practices are increasingly defined by technical regulations rather than an abstract and theory-based body of knowledge’. A similar conclusion could be made for centre-based children’s services where their expertise is increasingly measured by the practitioner devised and implemented NCAC’s long day care accreditation standards potentially enhancing the claim for professional authority. In addition to centre accreditation being a ‘self-regulating’ process, one of its objectives is to highlight the professionalism of staff and therefore give a greater profile to the nature of their work. While accreditation might convey to the community the quality of the labour in one respect, the failure to achieve occupational closure protecting the market scarcity of qualified practitioners tends to dilute perceptions of professionalism owing to the relatively high proportion of staff without a relevant and formal qualification.

This discussion of professionalization emphasizes the fluid and multifaceted character of an occupation’s conversion to a profession. Centre-based children’s services, in recent times, displays some of these facets yet it is evident critical aspects cannot be identified. Despite the policy and
community responsibilities thrust upon staff it is not possible to conclude this occupation has acquired professional status yet, though arguably this could occur sooner rather than later. For this occupational group to achieve professional status – broadly defined – a clear delineation between ECEC and less formal child care arrangements and domestic parenting is required. New titles and labels in government programs, reports, material and literature are necessary (and employers’, trade unions’, media, and even academic writing) but not sufficient, as a mere name change will not illustrate higher levels of knowledge, skill and expertise. To achieve recognition of the renamed occupation as a profession, practitioner labour must have scarcity value by excluding the untrained and unqualified from centre-based employment. This outcome need not be university education faculty based, as ECEC is largely multidisciplinary with a holistic approach to working with children, parents and their communities. While there are clear advantages for the industry in terms of status, for staff in terms of improved remuneration (assuming pay is a proxy for skill), and parents in terms of the quality of children’s services, there are also costs: financial costs for government, employers and/or parents, and reduced employment opportunities for some people.

Finally, the (future) shape of the children’s services profession is a matter of conjecture, as is how it might be realised. To date, at least, the industrial, union-initiated, path has achieved more substantial benefits for the industry than an independent, stand-alone, professionalization project, particularly one separated from workplace issues. Given the range of interests the professionalization of children’s services potentially conflicts with, there are considerable obstacles in this path. In order to overcome many of these, workers in the industry and other interested groups need to develop a style of professionalism that avoids appearing to be self-serving, with the potential to deliver collaboration on early childhood education and care reform that is in the interests of children, families and children’s services employees.

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**References**


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