

# Supporting teacher professionalism through tailored professional learning

Andrea Nolan\* and Tebeje Molla – *Deakin University, Australia*

## Abstract

The issue of continuing professional learning for educators in the early childhood education and care sector is in the spotlight in Australia due to the government's reform agenda, which seeks to professionalize the workforce. In an effort to ensure quality programmes are on offer for all children, educators are expected to upskill. The assumption is that quality learning opportunities for children are aligned with a more skilled and capable workforce. This is problematic due to the diversity of the early childhood education and care workforce and its ability to convert professionalization opportunities into achievements. The focus of this article is a study that problematized the alignment of professional attributes valued in the policy space and in the field of practice to understand educator agency, a key element of professional capability. Once this alignment is known, professional learning experiences can be tailored to better support the professionalization of these educators.

**Keywords:** professional learning; capability; professional functionings; agency; teacher professionalism; early childhood educators

## Introduction

Quality services for young children and their families are now aligned with the professionalization of staff in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector (COAG, 2009). This is true not only for Australia, but also for other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and has ramifications for the professional learning of the ECEC workforce. Since the late 2000s, Australia's ECEC sector has experienced a series of reforms that have brought a renewed interest in the capability of the workforce to ensure that they deliver quality programmes leading to better long-term outcomes for children. The reforms have brought about increased regulation, with the implementation of a national early years learning framework to guide practice (*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* – DEEWR, 2009) and quality assessments of services against national benchmarks (*National Quality Standard* – ACECQA, 2012). As Bretherton (2010: 8) observes, these government initiatives provide 'scope for the sector to shift from a path of skill atrophy toward a path of skill growth ... along with the scope for professionalization'. In Australia, professionalization is attributed to upskilling the workforce through the gaining of qualifications and professional development. Following Ingersoll et al. (1997: vii), the professionalization of educators refers to 'the movement to upgrade the status, training, and working conditions' of individuals working directly with children in the ECEC sector.

Teacher professionalization is directly linked with the process of transforming an occupation into a profession, and the quality, autonomy and status of the job (Socokett, 1993). Unfortunately, the struggle for recognition of professional status in the early childhood field is 'difficult and ongoing' (Ortlipp *et al.*, 2011: 56) due to differing conceptualizations of early childhood professionals (Oberhuemer, 2005). This has led to 'instabilities surrounding professional identity and how the members of the field regard themselves and their work' (Ortlipp *et al.*, 2011: 56). According to Ortlipp *et al.* (2011), and confirmed by Miller Marsh (2003), professional discourses are shaped by theoretical and conceptual resources that the sector draws upon, such as standards and codes of practice, national policy contexts, structural and institutional relationships and the language used to communicate within and outside the sector. The agenda does not consider the complexity and diversity of the workers, the fragmented nature of the sector, the alignment of professional identities with emotional labour – especially when the workforce is comprised mainly of women (Blackmore, 2009; Brennan, 1998) – or the discourses of care that strongly underpin practice (Dalli, 2002).

To be able to successfully perform their roles, teachers need to be able to pursue what they value in their practice and 'make choices, take principled action and enact change' (Anderson, 2010: 541). This positions agency as a key element of teachers' professional capability (Alexander, 1987). However, this is problematic due to the diversity of the ECEC workforce, and its ability to convert professionalization opportunities (physical, social and emotional resources) into achievements. This study examines the alignment of professional attributes valued in the policy space and in the field of practice to identify real opportunities for professional growth, noting the extent to which educators have agency to pursue and achieve their valued professional capabilities. Once this is known, professional learning experiences can be tailored to better support the professionalization of these educators.

In this article, our main focus is on the interaction between policy and the practice of educators assessed through five attributes of professional functionings to explore what facilitates educator professional agency and what constrains it. Agency is an important consideration, as the implementation and subsequent success of the Early Childhood Reform Agenda lies in the hands of the educators who are tasked with implementing the policies. In other words, Australian early childhood educators' professional capacity is critical in achieving the goals set out by the government's reform agenda (Whittington *et al.*, 2014). For this reason, we ask two questions:

- What mediates educators' professional agency in the professionalization agenda?
- What are the ramifications for professional learning?

## Theoretical framing and methodology

### Theoretical framing: Capability approach

We draw from the work of Amartya Sen, an Indian economist and philosopher. Sen's (1993, 1999) capability approach to human development provides for an expansive view of teacher professionalization, positioning agency as a key element. Preparing educators for professional practice means expanding their capabilities in the areas of pedagogic and policy practices, and creating favourable conditions for them to put those capabilities to use. This approach draws attention to how able educators are to utilize available resources and convert them into valuable functions to support them in their professional work. It highlights how the recognition and convertability

of resources into capabilities provided by policy depends on conversion factors. The ability to convert depends on the personal biographies, social factors, socio-economic status and social arrangements, such as policies and regulations, that educators have experienced (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005). The capability approach also recognizes the role of adaptive preferences, which link objective constraints with conditioned perceptions and responses. This views personal responses as conditioned or disciplined through socialization and historical experiences (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1989), and these impact on an educator's agency, such as the choices they make and the action they take towards change (Anderson, 2010).

We propose that the professionalization of early childhood educators should be measured in terms of what they are actually able to be and do, rather than the amount of resources made available for professional development. To understand educators' real opportunities to achieve what they have reason to value in their professional practice, we utilized the notion of professional functionings, expressed in the enactment of professional capabilities of the educators. Then we identified five attributes of professional functionings of early childhood educators: expertise, deliberation, recognition, responsiveness and integrity (Molla and Nolan, 2018). Relatedly, we see professional learning as the expansion of teachers' freedoms to effectively perform their professional roles – enhancing their professional agency. Agentic teachers are those who are able to choose what to value, as well as how to pursue what they value in relation to their professional lives. They are capable of identifying and making use of the opportunities that are on offer to advance their professionalism.

As noted earlier, agency can be defined as a teacher's 'capacity to make choices, take principled action, and enact change' (Anderson, 2010: 541). This allows educators to follow what they deem to be important in their practice, utilizing resources that are available to them to support them in their quest. As has been shown in previous research (Nolan and Molla, 2017), educator confidence to be and do what one values in one's practice is an essential element of educator professionalism, such as 'to be self-organising, self-reflective, self-regulating and proactive in their behaviour' (Bray-Clark and Bates, 2003: 14). Professional confidence expands through the accumulation of elements of professional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012), and is driven by reflection and practical judgement (Schön, 1987). As research suggests (Johnson and Birkeland, 2003: 594), educators actively pursue a 'sense of success', which is supported by an accumulation of micropolitical, political, organizational and community-based capital (Anderson, 2010). This acknowledges the influence of aspects such as culture and autobiographical factors, along with competing and conflicting goals aligned with curriculum expectations and policy (Bergh and Wahlström, 2018). This ecological view of agency acknowledges the relational dimensions of educators' work, concentrating on individuals' engagement with, and responsiveness to, their contexts and situations (Bergh and Wahlström, 2018; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Biesta *et al.*, 2017; Datnow, 2012). This positions agency as both relational and temporal, as 'it is something that occurs over time and is about the relations between actors and the environments in and through which they act' (Bergh and Wahlström, 2018: 40). This has ramifications relating to educators' ability to understand and take up available opportunities to support their professional growth. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963) theorize agency as involving the interplay of three dimensions, which vary 'within different structured contexts of action', these being routine, purpose and judgement on the part of the educator. Relatedly, we know that educators' professional knowledge is provisional and open to change depending on the context in which they work (Doecke *et al.*, 2008).

## Methodology

This study was an interpretive inquiry (Yanow, 2006) seeking to represent the social reality of the participants through mapping webs of meaning underpinning specific issue-framings at both policy and practice levels. The intent was to understand educators' interpretations of the world around them, including the meanings and purposes they ascribe, 'which yield insight and understanding of people's behaviour' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011: 18).

After approval to conduct the study was granted by the university involved and the state-based education department, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Long Day Care Diploma-qualified educators. These educators included eight females and two males from five different ethnocultural backgrounds. Their experience working in the ECEC sector ranged from 10 months to 12 years, with the average being 4.7 years. They held the mid-level qualification (diploma) required to work with young children, with the lowest level being a certificate and the highest level a degree qualification (that is, afforded the status of 'teacher'). The long day care centre where the educators worked was located in an area of Melbourne, Australia, where the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA; a measure used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to rank areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage across four indices) showed relatively greater disadvantage. It is important to note that the management of this centre valued professional learning and allowed its staff to attend as many professional development trainings as they felt they required. It is also worth noting that this centre had a large number of staff who were undertaking further qualifications – something that, while not uncommon within the sector, was more than usually concentrated at this centre. This was possibly due to the fact that the centre provided a before- and after-school programme for school-aged children, as well as a long day care programme for younger children. As is common in some areas of Victoria, many staff working in the before- and after-school programmes are university students studying for teaching qualifications (early childhood or primary school teaching).

The interviews were held at a time and place convenient for the participants, and were audio-recorded. Interview transcripts were member-checked. The questions asked during the individual interviews explored educators' real opportunities for professional growth, and the extent to which they have the agency to pursue and achieve their valued professional capabilities. Questions were organized under three headings:

- Demographic, which collected information relating to qualifications, years of experience, position within the organization, professional development opportunities and anticipated further training/education.
- Philosophy, requesting educators to outline their beliefs and understandings about how young children learn, and their role as an educator.
- Professionalization, concentrating on aspects of their practice that educators found themselves reflecting on, what it means to be a professional, essential characteristics of professional practices in working with children, colleagues and families, and, when engaging with policy and government initiatives, what assists and also constrains them to be professional in their work, and how they are valued as an early childhood professional.

It is the third heading, 'professionalization', along with the demographic information, that informs this article.

Additionally, four key policies of the reform agenda were reviewed:

- *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2012)
- *Early Childhood Development Workforce* (Productivity Commission, 2011)
- *Early Years Workforce Strategy 2012–2016* (SCSEEC, 2012)
- *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009).

Thematic analysis guided the analysis process (Flick, 2014). This called for a close reading and rereading of the data, looking for keywords, ideas and themes that would assist in the analysis. We 'inductively explored the data' (Guest *et al.*, 2012: 8), identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data – assigning codes and themes. We reviewed the policy for each of the five attributes of professional functionings that we had identified in our framework, and then followed this by aligning our identified themes from the interview data to these functionings. Theory then assisted us to understand our findings.

## Findings

In this section we highlight professional functionings valued in policies and by the educators. We present the findings under each of the five attributes introduced in the theoretical framing section. Pseudonyms have been used in place of educator names.

### Expertise

Policy in the area of expertise expects educators to be well trained and qualified (SCSEEC, 2012: 9), and to hold specialist knowledge and skills – 'the right knowledge and skills are essential to quality outcomes for children'. This knowledge is qualified as an 'in-depth knowledge of each child' to ensure quality learning outcomes (DEEWR, 2009: 9). It is assumed that educators will have access to professional development and job-training opportunities to support knowledge acquisition, with opportunities for 'upskilling' (SCSEEC, 2012: 9). In the accounts of the educators, expertise entails knowledge and skills and professional dispositions.

### *Building knowledge and skills*

In our study, many of the educators were upgrading their qualifications and valuing the attainment of knowledge, with six of the ten interviewees currently studying the early childhood education degree, which is the next level of qualification from the diploma that these educators held. It is interesting to note that many of the educators also held other qualifications outside of early childhood, some of which were from overseas institutions and at higher levels to what was required for their childcare job. However, these qualifications are not acknowledged in the ECEC sector as a determinant of practice or expertise. The educators in our study spoke of some diploma-qualified colleagues employed at a lower certificate level, but accepted this act as fair and 'just' (Sheila).

The educators were encouraged by the centre management to individually identify their own professional learning needs. This enabled them to locate offerings that they felt were most beneficial for them. Their suggestions were then supported by the centre management:

So my management have said to me: 'You can source your own training as long as you think it's relevant to your work' and if it's within reason, they'd pay for it. (Adrian)

You are able to go out and find any further development that you want to do and go to your management and say 'this is what I'm interested in, this is what I want to do' and they're really open and accepting and helping you get positions and helping to pay for that. (Cheryl)

Educators' professional learning choices were driven by their own realization that there were aspects of their practice that required further knowledge, such as working with a child experiencing learning difficulties. This relied on educators' ability to critically reflect on their practice and to articulate their desires to management. The following excerpts illustrate the variance in educators' ability to initiate their own professional learning:

I realized the lack of knowledge and training surrounding that [working with children with diabetes]. So I initiated to go to management and say, 'Hey, can we have a training session about this?' and I just got confirmation that it's happening tomorrow night. (Mona)

I've been able to source my own, and they've paid for me to go to it, as well. (Sheila)

We go for many PDs [professional development] and they give us the choice that – this is the list, and the list is kept in the staffroom ... Sometimes, when they get the notification from any of the places that, OK, the manager will say we are doing the PD and then they offer us, do you want to do it? If they say yes – if I say yes, then we go for it. (Jewel)

For a couple of educators, anxiety drove what they chose. In these cases, the educators felt that they needed to keep 'up to date' with knowledge acquisition due to the swift pace of change experienced in the sector as a consequence of the reform agenda. As one educator explained: 'And we have to keep learning, just like searching things because they just keep changing' (Sharna).

### **Professional dispositions**

What was regarded as of utmost importance in the area of expertise for these educators were professional dispositions. While unrecognized in policy documents, all educators believed that professional dispositions were expressions of their expertise. These dispositions included aspects such as having patience, passion, dedication, warmth, empathy, confidence and being homely:

You need to be confident. (Sheila)

You need to be caring, definitely caring. You need to be knowledgeable and passionate. (Cheryl)

A passion to work with the children, that's the most important thing. (Sharna)

### **Deliberation**

In the space of deliberation, policies privilege professional judgements by educators on children's learning and development, with 'a lively culture of professional inquiry'

encouraged (DEEWR, 2009: 13). Educators are expected to be reflective practitioners who engage in 'ongoing cycles of review through which current practices are examined, outcomes reviewed and new ideas generated' (ibid.). This extends to collaborative reflection on practice where ideas are raised and debated with colleagues, with a view to improvement and change. The educators in our study expressed their deliberative engagement in terms of effortful thinking about their practice and purposeful dialogue with their colleagues.

### ***Effortful thinking about practice***

Reflecting on practice is an everyday expectation for early childhood educators, a notion embraced by all of the interviewees for this study. The educators noted that they deliberated on their pedagogy and practice, which at times led them to consider other ways of undertaking aspects of their work: 'I reflect on everything, I always reflect on stuff, I always overthink about things too much' (Cheryl).

For some educators there was self-awareness of who they were as practitioners, noting what needed improving in their own practice. For others, there was a questioning of their own knowledge base and an aspiration to learn more about specific pedagogical practices. Two educators spoke of how they each had at times questioned the centre's policies and the expected practice, due to their own beliefs about what was best in educating and caring for young children. One educator explained:

I ask questions but generally I got shot down – 'It's policy' – that's the answer that I got but, like, nobody could actually explain to me why that policy was in place and that really is frustrating. I hate that comeback 'it's policy' – I hate that comeback – explain to me, so I can understand. OK, fair enough, it's a policy, but why? (Cheryl)

### ***Sharing reflections with colleagues***

Sharing reflections as a way to learn from colleagues was viewed by the majority of educators as the best way to work. This calls for the building of strong relationships where there is a level of trust and professional respect between colleagues. Such an environment can facilitate the sharing of ideas, experiences and knowledge, as the following interview excerpts illustrate:

Being open with one another. Giving permission to call each other out on things that aren't right, or maybe you could improve on. (Sheila)

I definitely feel like if I do think about things to myself and then if I do have an issue with them, I can talk to one of my other educators about it. (Cheryl)

## **Recognition**

Policy documents clearly signal the value that families and communities should attribute to the specialist skills and knowledge that educators hold. 'Families and communities recognize that Early Childhood Education and Care Educators have specialist skills and knowledge that supports the development and learning of children' (SCSEEC, 2012: 5). It is also noted that professionalism needs to be enhanced. However, attracting and retaining teachers in services is difficult without improving the remuneration they receive for the work that they undertake (Productivity

Commission, 2011). For the educators in our study, professional recognition is linked with being acknowledged and valued for one's qualification, expertise and practice.

### ***Feeling acknowledged and valued***

Educators felt that they were valued in the sense that their qualification was a requirement to work in the ECEC sector:

There needs to be a Diploma-qualified person. (Adrian)

We all recognize that each and every one of us have a qualification. (Mona)

As noted earlier, many staff were upgrading their qualification, as this was seen as a marker of status and knowledge. Educators had a sense that they were valued by their colleagues and the centre management as a whole, due mainly to the fact that educator opinions and knowledge were requested and valued by colleagues, although for one participant respect had to be earned by showcasing what she knew, understood and could do. As she explains, 'It's a catch-22 in a way. Unless we show that, we won't get it back' (Jewel).

In regard to parents and the community in general, educators felt that there was a lack of recognition and underestimation of the work that they did. This was a common sentiment across all educator interviews, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

I think that the community sees it as glorified babysitting and they don't have the knowledge to know what goes into being a qualified diploma-level educator. (Mona)

Like the way the parents are talking to us, like we can feel like it's not been valuable, like our job ... they don't think we are also, like, educated. (Sharna)

This lack of recognition and understanding was considered as a general disregard for the work of the educators. Educators felt this sentiment was exacerbated by the low pay they received for the job: 'Regarding the pay also, if they respect, definitely they would increase the pay' (Adel). Also highlighted as an important factor in the low status of their work was the fact that registered training organizations were sanctioned by the government to fast track diploma training. Educators saw this move as undervaluing the knowledge and skills required to effectively work as a diploma-qualified educator. As one educator related:

I think if the government is letting the course be pumped out in six weeks or whatever it is, yeah, they probably don't value the actual work that needs to be done and the capabilities of the diploma-level educator and what they need to be. (Adrian)

### **Responsiveness**

Educators responding confidently to the diverse requirements of children from an equity or social justice disposition is enshrined in policy (SCSEEC, 2012). This positions responsiveness as 'honour[ing] the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families', while valuing 'children's different capacities and abilities and respect for differences in families' home lives' (DEEWR, 2009: 13). Cultural competence is emphasized, with the expectation that educators will communicate and interact effectively with people from differing cultures, respecting and celebrating the different ways of living and knowing (DEEWR, 2009). This means



honouring differences (ibid.). For the educators, responsiveness is about tailoring pedagogic work for each child.

### ***Tailoring programmes for each child***

During the interviews, educators spoke at length about the importance of knowing each child they worked with so that they could plan and interact with them effectively to support their learning and development. The following excerpt is representative of this:

So, I suppose, it starts when – if I'm either new to a room, or we have new children coming in, I try to get to know that child and their background, their culture, their families. From there, I kind of programme and plan around that. Try to be really inclusive. (Sheila)

Educators spoke about how they catered for the different ethnic backgrounds of the children and families with whom they worked. They drew from their own experiences and their knowledge base, and prioritized respect as a way to acknowledge and understand the cultural backgrounds and practices of the families: 'It's good to know all those cultures, and respecting each other is very, very important' (Adel). In their programmes, educators would learn some words in the child's language, utilize multicultural resources such as different coloured dolls or toys, offer cultural food and celebrate cultural festivals. One educator explains:

I have different cultures in the room, but so far they are really good, like they all are playing together, even the families are also all right. So for the different culture, we are celebrating different things in the room. If there is, like, any Indian or any religious things or anything, we are doing that in the room. (Sharna)

For children who presented with learning difficulties, such as autism spectrum disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, some educators felt the need to expand their own knowledge base to ensure they knew how best to support these children in their classroom. What was missing from all educators' comments was attention to the learning needs of children from poverty backgrounds. This was surprising given the location of the centre in an area deemed as low socio-economic status.

## **Integrity**

Policy positions being professional as exhibiting respectful and ethical practice. This means following institutional rules and regulations, and interacting in ways that 'convey mutual respect, equity and recognition of each other's strengths and skills' (ACECQA, 2012: Section 4.2.3). At practice level, educators in our study highlighted two aspects of professional integrity: awareness of personal and professional boundaries, and compliance.

### ***Awareness of boundaries***

All educators interviewed spoke of boundaries between their personal and professional selves. A number of them spoke of not crossing 'the line', such as keeping 'a professional line between yourself and the families as well ... You know, just try and keep it about the work and the child's experiences here at the service' (Adrian). This meant not becoming overly friendly and intimate with families, while still developing a trusting and respectful relationship.

## Compliance

Educators considered acting with integrity as being 'professional'. This meant complying with all expectations as set out in rules and regulations, even though you may disagree with them: 'Because you are working, you know, ethically, you need to obey their rules' (Adel). This mostly related to the rules and policies of the centre where educators worked, although for some educators it broadened to encompass national frameworks to guide practice. While some educators felt they had a solid understanding of policies by 'making sure that you're keeping yourself up to date' (Sheila) and 'you can't really engage with the policies unless you know them' (Adrian), other educators wanted more clarification and understanding. As Mona stated, 'As for policy, I'm constantly being told the policy. And I think that's where I lack knowledge, which is OK. And I'm constantly learning about it.' The perceived fast pace of change due to the reform agenda caused a few educators to be concerned about what this meant for policy implementation:

As a professional, it's good to have the policies, because we need the policies and procedures, especially working with ... dealing with ... the children and parents. But it's a bit hard when it keeps changing, because we have to adjust to that every time when it's changing. (Sharna)

A small number of educators drew from their experience and professional understandings to problematize policies, particularly at the centre level:

But we are following them now. But you know, just 1 to 5 per cent, I don't think it works, not 100 per cent. But most of the time it works ... So these type of things [policies], sometimes they stop us to give 100 per cent service to them [the children]. But maybe they made these rules for some reason, I know that. But sometimes you know it stops us to – not to be 100 per cent professional. (Adel)

Sometimes, with policy, I believe they're trying to cover their backs more than to care about the children, and I know that's a very big statement but I do feel that way. (Cheryl)

The sentiment of acting with integrity expanded to the relational side of practice, with one educator explaining:

You've got to be professional and the fact that even though you might not like someone or you might not agree with them – but that's OK – professionalism, you need to acknowledge that ... and move on. (Cheryl)

This sense of being professional also encompassed ethical considerations. Aspects such as privacy and confidentiality were mentioned by educators as extremely important to acting professionally. Educators were mindful of who they were sharing sensitive information with, and that 'gossip[ing]' was not a sanctioned practice of professionals.

## Discussion

Where does professional agency sit in relation to the professionalization agenda? Following the attributes of professional functionings presented above, we argue that educators with a strong sense of agency are those who: (1) have speciality knowledge that is acknowledged, and actively seek learning opportunities; (2) think effortfully

about their beliefs, assumptions and practices; (3) demand to be valued and respected for their professional work; (4) are committed to addressing educational disadvantages and injustice; and (5) act ethically and make morally justifiable decisions. For the group of educators who were the focus of this study, how able they were to make informed choices, take principled action and enact change varied across professional functionings.

In regard to expertise, educators felt that, while their diploma qualification was a marker of their status and knowledge, this was not recognized by the families with whom they worked, the community in general or the government. Being seen as glorified babysitters with low remuneration for their work did nothing to lift the status of the profession. With early childhood education and care being a female-dominated profession, there has been an alignment with the work of the early childhood educator and the role of mothering. This acts to disempower early childhood educators in claiming professional status (Dalli, 2002). This is further exacerbated by educators positioning dispositions of caring, empathy, patience and passion as essential to their practice. This speaks to a discourse of love and care, which Dalli (2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2008) believes needs to permeate scholarly discussions relating to professionalism in order to reconceptualize professionalism to the uniqueness of early childhood practice. Currently such dispositions are not part of the policy discourse relating to being an early childhood professional.

Supporting educators to reflect on their practice is recognized as important by both policy and educators. However, it is very easy for educators to overlook aspects of their practice that have become taken for granted. For this group of educators, the context of their practice – the low socio-economic status of the area and the poverty experienced by many of the children they taught – was not apparent in their teaching. Culture was the most salient issue for the educators, and this dominated considerations of their practice. Professional learning that provides opportunities for educators to be confronted with what they have stopped seeing in their practice in a trusting and collegial environment (Nolan and Molla, 2018b), enables them to be more open to notice, engage with and question their beliefs and assumptions. Our previous research (Nolan and Molla, 2018c) has shown that for professional learning to be effective there needs to be an association between educators' aspirations and systematic requirements, a sense of collegiality between participants, critical deliberation in 'safe' learning environments where one can share knowledge and experiences without fear of retribution, and acknowledgement that learning takes place in the domains of professional dispositions, pedagogical knowledge and social capital. If a pedagogy of discomfort model guides professional learning (Nolan and Molla, 2018a), 'unconscious dispositions' (Reay, 2004: 438) can become raised to the conscious level and then opened up for scrutiny, triggering moments of disjuncture leading to transformative learning and a more expansive view of social justice. As noted elsewhere (Molla and Nolan, 2019), the professionalization of the ECEC workforce focuses on building pedagogical competence and cultivating professional dispositions. Included in this is social justice intentionality and cultural sensitivity. Questioning the nature and adequacy of knowledge of one's pedagogical work is a key expression of professional agency (Goodson and Hargreaves, 2003).

While abiding by the rules and regulations is considered part of professional practice, the role of critical reflection on practice and advocating for the profession needs to be considered. As Oberhuemer (2005) proposes, educators need to openly reflect on their personal and professional understandings and beliefs, relating

these to policy expectations. It is suggested that educators consider themselves as 'interpreters and not as mere implementers of curricular frameworks' (ibid.: 12). This calls for educators to not only reflect on their practice, but also to feel confident in their understandings and interpretations of policy. Our findings illustrate the need for some educators to gain a stronger understanding of policy and the rationale underpinning it. Having a deeper understanding of how policy is framed will help educators position their practice and themselves within the wider 'ecological conditions through which it is enacted' (Biesta *et al.*, 2017: 40). This means having an awareness of the 'multidimensional structures' that influence their agency (Bergh and Wahlström, 2018: 2). With greater understanding of policy, educators may be able to embrace the pace of change they are experiencing and work with it to enhance practice, and in so doing advocate for improved professional recognition from a more informed standpoint.

Finally, policy expectations of educator professionalization needs to take into account the diversity of the ECEC workforce. The ECEC workforce in Australia encompasses staff at different qualification levels, working under different awards, with different salaries, different training, undertaking different roles, in different service types. These factors influence an educator's ability to make use of the resources that may be available to them. Subjective choices are shaped and informed by cultural, social, economic and historical forces that shape society in general (Bourdieu, 1990). Educators adjust their values and choices to what they perceive as realistic possibilities. Therefore, even though there may be opportunities that educators have access to, they may still have diminished professional agency due to their conditioned preferences (Sen, 1993). Transformative professional learning experiences offer an ideal condition to encourage educators to be reflective about their preferences and the implications for their practice.

## Conclusion

In this article, drawing on a capability approach to human development, we set out to show the dynamic interplay between teacher agency and professional functionings, and how this influences professionalism. We argue that given the complexity of upgrading an occupational group into a profession, an expansive view of teacher professionalization needs to consider structural factors embedded in personal experiences, institutional arrangements and social relations that mediate the expansion of professional capabilities. A freedom-based assessment of agency shifts the focus of professional learning from knowledge and acquisition to voice and engagement, which are expressed in the ability of educators to articulate their preferences, advance their interests and exert influence.

We propose that by considering educator agency through the five attributes of professional functionings, professional learning possibilities can be identified. This can then flow into tailored professional development that is responsive to the educators' requirements dictated by the points of tension between policy expectations and educator experiences. Professional learning can assist educators to recognize real opportunities for their professional growth, and problematize interactive forces influencing their professional capabilities – their ability to pursue and achieve their valued professional goals. Transformative professional learning experiences are instrumental in enabling educators to critically reflect on their own practice, achieve a higher level of policy literacy and reorient their social justice dispositions. This could

lead to an increase in confidence to advocate for what they value in their professional lives, building a case for the reconceptualization of professionalism in the early childhood sector (Dalli, 2002). In this respect, an expansive view of educator agency presented in this article suggests that the policy emphasis on regimes of performance standards and accountability in the ECEC sector undermines genuine professionalization of the workforce.

## Notes on the contributors

**Andrea Nolan** is Professor of Early Childhood Education at Deakin University, Australia. Her research is framed around early childhood education and care workforce capabilities, focusing on the professional learning and practice of educators.

**Tebeje Molla** is Research Fellow at Deakin University in the School of Education. His research focuses on education policy analysis, educational inequality and teacher professional learning.

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