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More than Words for Working with Children and Families

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The focus for this special issue arose as a result of noticing the emerging challenges being made to “traditional,” neoliberal understandings of knowledge and knowing coupled with the strengthening international interest in the professionalization of the early years workforce, who, it might be argued, have worked hard to create a knowledge base from which to grow their understanding of the child. This knowledge base has, to some extent, been dominated by hegemonic discourses of developmentalism—absorbed into policy and standardized within some, if not many, education programs for early years practitioners. These two elements combined offered the opportunity to consider alternative ways of knowing(s) for working with young children.

International interest in the lives and development of young children has resulted in an increased close examination of those who work with children and families. Premised on the grounds of supporting equality of opportunity for children and families, whilst laying the foundations to children’s lifelong learning, there is a scrutiny of what those who work with and alongside children and families are expected to know to be successful professionals. However, within technocratic models of accountability, the “good” professional is the one who can achieve the desired outcomes. Professional knowledge is reduced to that which can be described and documented, dwelling on

logic and reason, with an underlying assumption that we are not professional if we cannot account for something (Shotter, 2015). The singular of “knowledge” implies a solitary way of knowing, whereby there is one knowledge to inform working with children and families, as opposed to a complex intermingling of knowledges. A focus on knowledges not only opens up multiple ways of knowing, but also a consideration of the different ways of knowing and how these might be articulated (Campbell-Barr, 2017).

If we return to the same words (and knowledge) to describe work with children and families, we can only travel the same paths of knowing. Describing work with children and families risks becoming reduced to the lowest common denominator of what we are willing to say (or not) about working with children and families. However, there is much about knowing that is beyond words. Even the distinction between the deliberative thinking self and the thinking that just happens implies a form of knowing that is located in the mind. Knowledges and ways of knowing have been constructed within Cartesian mind/body splits—cerebral, cognitive, contained, as opposed to the affective, the embodied (Murriss, 2016). The embodied extends to consider the interconnected, intermingled, connections between bodies (and other objects) that develop other forms of knowing (Lavelle, 2020). As babies, there is an acceptance that we do not have the words to

express our thinking, but we develop an attunement to others, learning to read facial expressions, tone, and intonation (Shotter, 2015). Acknowledging that what is known is more than words opens up alternatives for considering the knowledgeable self. As we move beyond the purely linguistic, this special issue seeks to explore embodied forms of knowing, gut feelings, and intuition, which would ordinarily be cast aside for evidenced-based knowledge.

Knowing and Intuition

With the increasing interest in—and funding for—Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has come a level of accountability which positions value in evidence-based knowledge. Masculine models of professionalism that favor logic and reason, have provided a guiding force to policy initiatives to “upskill” and professionalize the ECEC workforce. Individual performativity of rationality and personal entrepreneurialism provided a model for ECEC professionalism that favored technocratic models of professional competences and standards (Campbell-Barr, 2017). As a result, feminine ways of knowing, emotional and affective, have been side-lined and devalued, with the rationale and objective prioritized. This is particularly visible within a political climate and sector pressures which seek to “professionalize” a workforce (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020 – this issue), albeit without strategic direction. As Mikuska and Fairchild argue in their article, there is a need to move beyond the technocratic in search of knowledges that account for the multiple emotional relationships that can be encountered when working with children and families.

While we now seek to explore a reconfiguration of professional knowledges for ECEC, we wonder whether the sector pressures to “professionalize” previously resulted in some form of compliance. The positioning of caring as

a natural ability, closely aligned with femininity and mothering, saw personal dispositions become inseparable from the idea of a good care worker (Skeggs, 1997). Women have a long history of being provided with coded messages about right and wrong behaviors to guide their moral actions. Colley's (2006) research is frequently cited as an example of how those training to work in ECEC are subject to a hidden curriculum of the right and wrong ways to behave (and dress) when working with young children. The research suggests a form of compliance within the ECEC workforce—a particular way to behave and perform. While the compliance aligns with apparent feminine, motherly ways to behave, a petition for recognition of the social (and economic) importance and hard work of caring has also been a part of the call for professionalization. From within ECEC, there have been calls for wider recognition and status for the workforce. Therein lies a question as to whether in the search for recognition, did the ECEC community too eagerly perform to the neo-liberal tune of professionalism in order to resist the natural ability and mothering undertones.

We do not wish to undermine the important struggles that have taken place in seeking recognition and status for the ECEC workforce. Whilst this professionalization is one which has focused on upskilling, training, knowledge acquisition, and qualifications, there are others who have argued differently. Ardnt and Urban (2018, p. 99) have called for a shift

to the ways professional practice unfolds in reciprocal relationships and influences between all actors and their institutional environment. We refer to this interconnectedness and interdependency as the “critical ecology of the profession.”

Embodied knowledges, talk of intuition, and gut feelings are seen as dangerous, especially in a world which values the “expert,” “expertise,” and certainty. Even more so in a world where

ECEC practitioners are seeking to establish themselves within a stratified, hierarchical professional landscape. The body, it might be argued, is a thing of the child—the distrust of which starts in early childhood (Tobin, 2004). Women are generally asked what they feel, men, what they think. The professionalized discourse of reflection a process of thinking through feeling and feeling through thinking, is rooted in feminine practices of the affective. Think of medicine and nursing: one is regarded as exemplar of professionalism, the other a new profession, and yet there are lessons being taken from the new to the old. Reflection has been the life blood of caring professions and has recently been embraced by the more male-dominated practices of medicine. Likewise, dare we say it, academics and scholars establishing themselves within the academy are often caught up in the establishment of dichotomous knowledges. As the discourse of derision and hierarchies push downwards, leaking into spaces that young children inhabit, it is little wonder that this neglect of body knowledge is equally in danger of being talked out of early years settings.

There is an increasing body of work that is (re)turning to the notion of personal dispositions as being central to the work of those who care for and educate young children. A more post-structuralist, post-modernist, even post-humanist research perspective of professionalism sees professionalism differently. Rather than it being connected to skills and qualification, professionalism is about embodiment of local meanings, knowing and working, which is co-constructed together within settings with a variety of actors and actants, the more-than-human. In summarizing some of these perspectives below, we would highlight that rather than presenting an innate form of knowledge that is inborn, embodied knowledges are learnt, refined, developed, and attuned. This relational embodiment relates to Barad's

diffraction and quantum entanglements, whereby the knowledge is neither embodied or disembodied, but relational (see Haynes and Murriss, 2020 – this issue). Allowing for a more complex set of relations, diffracted through space-time-matterings, these knowledges have been, continue to, and will be, entangled with instrumental, standardized, troublesome (k)nowings—made sense of, dismissed, rejected and embraced in “mutual relationality” (Murriss and Bozalek, 2019, p875), unbound, sympoetic (Harraway, 2016).

This special issue moves away from mind/body binaries—shifting from a cutting (-chotomy) in two (di-), intuition versus reasoning, mind versus body, which privileges predominantly white, masculine, middle-class, colonial knowledges (Murriss, 2016) over intuitive, localized, feminine, embodied, and materialized ways of knowing. Embracing all entanglements and intra-actions with sounds, smell, memory, muscle, gut, finger tips, theory, heart, place, and so much more. (K)nowing and (k)not (k)nowing, here now, future and past, are at once tangible and intangible – “unmoored” and uncertain, an intra-action, “cutting together apart – one move” (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Knowledge creation, or “knowledge-making practices,” as Osgood et al. (2016) highlight, “knowing, thinking, measuring and theorising, are material practices of intra-acting, within and as part of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 91).

An ethics of care has long been presented as providing the conditions with which to critically consider ECEC, conceptualizing knowledge as plural (knowledges), opening up not only what one knows, but how they know when working with young children (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Authors such as Noddings (2012) and Goldstein (1998) have highlighted the moral dimension embedded in the caring relationship. There is not an effort to the moral dimension, but an orientation to the other, whereby bodies respond

and tune into each other. Shotter (2008) refers to a moment-by-moment responding that has an awareness of the child's interests and abilities, whereby the educator thinks with the child(ren) through a considered ethical attunement.

Georgeson (2018) refers to a sensitive anticipation, whereby through a watchfulness, those working with young children anticipate when and how to interact with them. While the thinking with draws attention to the mind, there is a careful reading of the situation that guides a responsiveness that is embodied in both action and feeling, blurring the boundaries between mind, feeling, and bodily action.

We Are Still Children

There are parallels with how knowledge is associated with children and the opening up of a reconfiguring of knowing for working with children. There is strong developmentalism associated with children's knowing, whereby childhood is associated with a time to invest in children's knowledge development. Early childhood has especially become bound by developmentalism, with connotations of the not yet ready (Edwards et al., 2009). McCrae and Arculus (this issue) highlight the attention that is given to, and effort that is put into wordism, whereby the non-verbal is associated with a sense of not-knowing. The wordism emphasizes that which we are trying to challenge and the need to move beyond words.

There has been a revisiting of developmentalism within ECEC, to free children and those who work with them from being bound by linear and prescriptive constructions of children's development. Many of the contributions in this special issue refer to Reggio Emilia as a philosophical approach that recognizes the different ways that children express themselves and "document" their development. Not only is expression reconfigured to go beyond words through the

notion of the One Hundred Languages, but there is a reconfiguration of time, to form an inter-looping of past, present, and future. No longer are children pulled into the future by child development knowledge, but the attunement to their needs and interests brings together past, present, and future, alongside an entwinement with the environment and the resources that are found within it.

The notion of the Hundred Languages has become a powerful force in ECEC for recognizing children's knowledges, but its application to professional knowledge is still emerging. As Whitty et al (this issue) highlight, the international discomfort with developmentalism that has enabled the Reggio Approach to resonate across so many parts of the world, illustrates that there is a sense of discomfort when considering the needs and interests of the child. However, there is also a need to explore the discomfort associated with understandings of professionalism in ECEC to consider how ECEC professionals transcend time and space.

Adults working with children are well rehearsed in playing with and transcending the boundaries of what is known – boxes that become space rockets, balls of wool that are unraveled into spiders' webs. In this special issue, we bring together examples of this playfulness that is so fruitful among ECEC professionals.

Multiple Ways of Knowing

The articles in this special issue, in being (re)present and assembled here, entangled in their first union, offer new and multiple ways of knowing. Whitty, Lysack, Lierette, Lehrer, and Hewes's article within this issue explores the "throwntogetherness" of the Canadian ECEC field. Here, three vignettes bring together the narratives of those who "stay with the trouble," despite the vicissitudes of a turbulent, changing, political landscape, in which ECEC policy and

authors are entangled. Persevering to find alternative ways of “being, acting and doing,” the authors hold together the needles on which they weave new ways of knowing and believing. Taking hold of the process despite it being difficult to see the future, they create, together, a future yet unknown. The “collective-body-assemblage” clear in the piece, with the narratives knitted together creating a sense of strength and belonging. This feels especially important when the riskiness of taking with you elements which have been critiqued within the ECEC sector—developmentalism, neoliberalism, and recent neuro-rationality—opening up the opportunity for a “more-than-developmentalism,” embracing the unknown and with it the possibilities of seeing the world differently in new space-time-matterings.

The theme of risk and dangerousness is also central in Haynes and Murriss’ article, which, like Whitty et al.’s article, challenges the dichotomous boundaries of oppositional, authoritarian hierarchies. Haynes and Murriss’ article exposes questions of knowing and how the knowing we know often privileges disembodied knowledge over the embodied. Teacher education, with its technical and standardized knowing, is one area where it might be argued, the body has been talked out of the lecture hall, and subsequently, the classroom and the early years setting (Tobin, 2004). Through an example of teaching on a module for PGCE, Haynes and Murriss challenge who has “epistemic credibility” in their exposition of “authority.” Drawing on Harraway’s “sympoetic pedagogies,” the article takes a scenario which exposed students’ fear of a “loss of control” within the class, along with a text from Michaud and Valitalo, to explore their emergent thinking, through and with materials, text, talk, and imagery. The entanglement of place (South Africa), time (post-apartheid drives for democratic citizenship), and curricula

experiences of P4E and bodies (children, students, tutors, along with materials and so much more) exemplify “a research ontology of multiplicity” (Taguchi, 2013, p.714).

The dominance of words, which this special issue has attempted to disrupt, is challenged further in McCrae and Archulus’ contribution. The piece takes theater’s dramaturgical concept of *Complicité*, which emphasizes collectivity, connection, and attunement, to re/turn to two vignettes from research with young, non-verbal children. The research is set against the backdrop of rising instrumentalization and economization of words, evident in the English government’s concern for the lack of words in young children and the drive for instrumentalist interventions which seek to reduce the “word-gap.” Words, it seems, have become currency, and in the UK at least, are positioned as reducing disadvantage and increasing social mobility (DfE, 2017). Clear is the way that interaction and communication for, and with the children, is indeed, more-than-words: materials, emotions, researchers, time, senses, camera. The re/turning to, offers a retuning into dimensions of intra-actions, freeing bodies, to move, intra-act in the time-space continuum. As McCrae and Archulus illustrates their “pedagogy of improvisation,” (re)turning to and staying with their original analysis to keep open and alert to new ways of knowing. In this way, what is created is the possibilities for multiple ways of knowing and knowledges, extending pedagogic relationships, not just in terms of relationship with knowledge, but with the embodied and material elements too.

Just as Whitty et al.’s starting point for their article was created as a result of a coming together in a space for thinking differently, likewise is Lamb et al.’s contribution to this special issue. Here, the authors jointly reflect on a cross-cultural intergenerational event designed to support girls and young women at risk of

gender-based violence. Through the use of self-reflective, research diaries and discussions between the researchers, all of whom were facilitators of the event, affective, embodied forms of reflexivity are worked through in this collaborative autoethnographic study. Even this methodological approach provides a way of considering how and what is known, and the looping together of knowledges over time.

Mikuska and Fairchild's article reminds us that the entanglements of ECEC are not just those that are formed between adult(s) and child(ren). ECEC professionals have multiple emotional relationships with children, families, and colleagues. Mikuska and Fairchild extend the discussion on emotional labor to highlight the entanglements with both human and other-than-human bodies. The article is a return to our own starting point—a discomfort with how professional knowledge was/is/and has been conceptualized in ECEC.

In bringing together the articles in this special issue, we feel, grapple, entangle, diffract, and more to represent a “something” that enables a more complex understanding of what it means to “know” for ECEC professionalism. We stay with the trouble and discomfort in seeking new stories of professional knowledges for ECEC and apologize for the shortcomings of words for expressing what this alternative path may offer.

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