PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNEY

By

GILLIAN R. JACKSON

Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

submitted to Dr. Nanci Langford

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

April, 2014
ABSTRACT

Recent changes in early childhood education practice in Ontario have resulted in increased expectations and understandings of professional practice for the early childhood educator. The intersection of early childhood practice in educational, social services and health care settings inform the need for understanding the value of interdisciplinarity, how it is practiced by early childhood educators and how it impacts outcomes for children and families. Employing an interdisciplinary research process that integrates the knowledge of the early childhood educator, the parent and the child, this paper identifies collaboration and collaborative practice from multiple disciplinary perspectives as a critical interdisciplinary practice.
Introduction

Early childhood education as a professional practice has been an emerging and developing sector in Canada for many years. It is a profession that has been influenced, affected and dependent on politics, values and social movements (Pence, 2008a, p.243.) In Ontario in 2007, legislation established the first regulatory body for early childhood educators. The College of Early Childhood Educators is the only self-regulatory body in North America for the profession. As values, politics and social movements shift and change, including the recognition of the importance of the early years, understanding of child development and recognition of children’s rights, interdisciplinary practice is an expected competency for the early childhood educator. It is important to know and understand how the professionalization of the early childhood educator is influenced and improved both through an interdisciplinary lens and interdisciplinary practice.

Interdisciplinary practice has always been an inherent part of early childhood education (ECE) through a focus on the whole child and understanding the child in context of the family. As the ECE profession continues to develop and establish itself alongside other recognized disciplines and professions it is necessary to identify and articulate the interdisciplinary characteristics of the profession, how they enhance the profession and how they contribute to improved outcomes for children, families, communities and society as a whole.

Early childhood education as a sector and the recognition of the contributions of this work has not had a strong identity within both the education and social services realm, evident in low remuneration, compensation and the status of the profession. Issues of power and agency, access to resources and involvement in policy development have limited the sector’s development, and the devaluing of educators and especially those working with young children has been extensively documented (Boyd, 2013, p.1.) The use of language has influenced the value of
the work (for the provider and recipient,) with terms of baby-sitter, care giver and child minder that underpins the important knowledge base and an understanding of what is involved in the work of the early childhood educator.

Scholarly pursuit and research specific to ECE “first emerged in the 1960’s, closely associated with an increase in the percentage of mothers of young children entering the labour force” (Pence, 2008b p.243.) An online search of scholarly sources reveal a prevalence of health and educational sources specific to young children that significantly outweigh ECE specific sources. This reinforces the marginalization of the profession in relation to more established professions in education, medical, and social work that possess stronger identities. This also contributes to understanding why it is necessary to enhance the development of the ECE profession.

The Master of Arts – Integrated Studies (MAIS) program provided the opportunity to include my ECE background into the different courses I pursued. When I reflect on and review previous assignments and papers, I was able to consistently include and integrate my ECE experience and knowledge in each course. My MAIS studies validated my ECE experience, my ECE knowledge as lived experience, the ongoing production of knowledge in ECE settings, my own embedded knowledge and the ways of being and working in the sector. The significance in the MAIS studies of looking at the creation of knowledge also makes room for the inclusion of the child as an active agent in the creation of knowledge, which for me is one of the most significant contributions as we further develop and strive for practices that reflect principles of equality and democracy; “Interdisciplinarity can also be considered in terms of its opening of potentials to enhance democratization of knowledge construction processes in society” (Romm, 1998, p. 65.) In early childhood settings this means being inclusive of the educator, the parent and the child.
My own experience as a practicing professional early childhood educator for over twenty years, and currently involved in a mentoring leadership pilot project with the College of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario, leads me to the exploration of specific interdisciplinary characteristics essential in ECE best practice. A significant amount of my own work has also been of an interdisciplinary nature, so it is important that I can share these experiences and the value of the work with colleagues (ECE and other.) The recent changes to the profession and sector, including politics, values and social movements, requires an increased understanding of the value of interdisciplinarity and how it is practiced by early childhood educators.

**Research Question**

*What interdisciplinary practice requirements are required for early childhood education professionals?*

An interdisciplinary research process provides the opportunity to review and analyze current early childhood development and professional practice research for evidence of integrated and interdisciplinary practice. It allows for the integration of knowledge from other professions that serve children and families that early childhood educators intersect with. Although ECE implies a specific image and model of practice, it is a broad practice that involves early intervention, family support, inclusion, community development and an acceptance and understanding that collaborative work between the child, family and community is necessary and increasingly complex.

The disciplines that I am drawing upon in my research sources include ECE, early childhood intervention, maternal child health and social work. The perspectives of the family and child are included as an equal voice to inform the experience of those with whom early childhood educators work. The child exists in the family
in the community and in the broader society; ECE practice exists in a similar context. Current evidence and research of the child’s perspective is problematic as this is most often retold and interpreted by adults. Maintaining this awareness and critically examining how the child’s perspective has been included should be kept front of mind.

Szostak evokes the idea of interdisciplinarity as a revolutionary act (Szostak, 2012, p. 184.) ECE and early childhood development as an area of research and study has literally exploded in the last ten years. “Even the best prepared trainers and faculty cannot possibly keep up with the rapidly developing knowledge bases in this interdisciplinary field or with new methods for teaching adults and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching” (Winton, McCollum & Catlett, 2008, p. vii.) Coupled with the understanding of family centred-practice and a children’s rights perspective, the opportunity to integrate the professional’s, the family’s and the child’s perspective into an interdisciplinary understanding, can only contribute to a revolution that emphasizes the value of children and the state of childhood.

The Changing Nature of the Early Childhood Educator

ECE as a sector and the role of the early childhood educator in Ontario experienced significant change in recent years. In 2007 there was the introduction of legislative recognition of the role and the scope of practice for early childhood educators. Since 2010 there has been rapid change of the child care system including an internal move between ministries from Children & Youth to Education and the implementation of full-day early learning for four and five year olds in schools. Coupled with increasing public awareness and understanding the importance of early years development and how it impacts the overall health and wellbeing of society, a new understanding of the early
childhood educational professional and the importance of interdisciplinary practice within the profession emerges.

The further development of the ECE sector through the creation of the regulatory college in Ontario emphasizes that “Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) are expected to work with members of other regulated professions such as social workers, psychologists, teachers and health professionals to provide an integrated support network for children and families” (CECE, 2013, pg.1.) I have chosen to use the College of Early Childhood Educators Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice as a grounding document to identify evidence of interdisciplinary practice and connect this to research on interdisciplinary practice. My intent is to integrate the interdisciplinary characteristics of practice from the child, family and professional perspectives. Professionalism develops at both an individual and a system level, dependent on individual practice but also dependent on establishing characteristics and features of the profession as a larger body.

**College of Early Childhood Educators Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice**

The College of Early Childhood Educators Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice “define and describe the professional knowledge, professional expertise and the ethical values and behaviours required of members of the College. These standards describe the complexity of the role and the wide ranging contributions that early childhood educators make to the care and learning of young children” (CECE, 2011, p.6.) What evidence of interdisciplinary practice lies within this document that guides the expectations of the early childhood educator and their practice?

The overarching role of the early childhood educator is to enhance the care and learning of children. The College exists to regulate the profession and ensure that this is what happens in practice. The scope of practice has previously been
identified and is broader than working in the more traditionally thought of child care or day care setting that evokes an image of caring for children while parents are otherwise occupied for reasons of employment or educational pursuit. Regardless of the context (early learning and care, private home, family support, hospital or health related, and educational systems,) the standards exist to promote excellence of ECE practice.

Collaboration and collaborative practice are a dominant premise of early childhood educator practice expectations and are evident throughout the standards (CECE, 2011.) Collaboration and collaborative practice are expressed in relation to the child, the family and the broader community. These include an expectation that early childhood educators will value the rights of the child; engage in reciprocal relationships with family members of children; collaborate with families by exchanging knowledge and sharing practices and resources; interact with colleagues and other professionals; and value and engage in collaboration with community agencies, schools and other professionals.

Collaboration and the expectations of collaborative practice are further identified as: “work collaboratively in the best interest of the children under their professional supervision; work collaboratively with colleagues in their workplaces; work collaboratively with community resource persons and members of other professions” (CECE, 2011, p. 19-20.) Collaboration and collaborative practice are consistent terms and concepts also identified and evident in the review of research into interdisciplinary practice from different disciplinary perspectives (Cartmel, 2013; FRP Canada, 2011; Hong, 2013; Nancarrow, 2013 and Okoronkwo, 2013.)

Reflection and reflective practice were also dominant practices and professional behaviours identified in the standards of practice and in the review of
interdisciplinary practice literature. However, in the identified purpose and limit in size of this particular paper, I am focusing on collaboration and collaborative practice as the identified interdisciplinary practice.

**Collaboration and the Child**

Collaboration, work collaboratively and collaborative practice are professional words used by professionals examining and describing the work they do. When the work involves others who are not professionals, such as the child and the family, what significance does the choice of language and the words used have on what the work is and how it is done? The child and the family do not enter into the relationship with the early childhood educator thinking about collaboration. I would say that they enter into the relationship hoping that they will be listened to, respected and responded to as different needs emerge and present themselves. It is valid to remember that the perspectives of others can be profoundly different based on terminology, language and basic words used to describe behavior. How is the child’s perspective on collaboration included in meaningful ways when we wouldn’t use the language of collaboration with the child?

This is supported in the research on children’s perspectives in early years settings that showed that by listening to children they can be involved and empowered to participate in decision making (Matthews, 2013a, p.242.) Overt collaboration is not the intention of the child in the relationship, obvious in the child’s capacity to choose whether or not to be an active participant, but maintaining awareness and understanding of the child’s agency in any given environment allows for the inclusion of the child’s perspective in the context. The adult works from a theoretical assumption that ensures the child have their own time, activities and space; gives ‘voice’ to children; and viewing or understanding the child as competent (Matthews, 2013b, p. 242.)
Consulting young children informs policy development (Woodhead & Moss, 2007, p.5) and as educational approaches change and adapt to current needs, learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together with, and learning to be (Nicolescu, p. 4), recognizing young children’s place in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach makes an important contribution to the development of knowledge that reflects a certain authenticity to true collaboration. Children are not passive participants in their environments; they are co-constructors and creators of their own knowledge as well as active contributors to collective knowledge.

Collaboration is acknowledged as an important component of team processes (Nancarrow et al, 2013a, p.2), but the context of why the team exists or has been created influences the difference between ideals and realities. When we engage in collaborative work with children, this includes an understanding of the creation of knowledge, so that “we can understand children from a multiplicity of perspectives and the effects that our understandings of childhood have on the lives of children and families” (Pence, 2008c, p.246.)

Collaboration and collaborative practice take place in different places and at different levels. Heavily dependent on the relationships that exist between two or more individuals, the reason for the relationship, the intent of an individual’s participation in the relationship and the expected outcomes of the relationship, reciprocity is a key element of engagement. “Shared knowledge should lead to a shared understanding based on an absolute respect for collaborative and collegial approaches that promote both collectiveness and individuality” (Nicolescu, 2002, in Cartmel, 2013a, p.403.) This is an area where the early childhood educator needs to proceed with caution though, because to date, there is recognition that the perspectives of children and, to a large extent
families, remain largely absent in much of the existing literature (Wong, 2013a, p. 349.) Genuine or authentic collaborative practice, which involves learning from those we are collaborating with (parent and child,) recognizing that “the power of children’s voices can result in a change in adults’ understandings” (Matthews, 2013c, p. 249) must be a conscious act and understanding within collaboration.

Collaboration and the Parent
The adults who surround the child impact the child’s development through their interactions and in the environments adults create and provide for the child. How the adults work together to do this is a constant process of collaboration. How the relationship was created informs the collaboration. Is the parent choosing to engage in the relationship; is it a result of a concern regarding the child’s health or development; is it a voluntary engagement or because of a child welfare concern? Each of these scenarios set up different levels of engagement and an understanding or expectation of roles, furthering evidence that the scope of practice in ECE is influenced by the setting of the practice.

Regardless of the setting and the role of the professional, we know that families have the primary and most significant impact on children’s development (FRP, 2011a, p.2.) A recognition that family-centred practice is best practice, that ECE work is consumer and family driven (Cleek, 2012a, p.208) and that the early childhood educator should see the parent as an ‘ad hoc professional’ (Matthews, 2013d, p.240) continue to inform collaborative behaviours for ECE practice. It is important to recognize that parents themselves can experience limited agency with professionals and it has been noted in research that there has been a “general lack of attention to power relations between professionals and service users” (Wong, 2013b, p.345.)
Parent engagement, family engagement, parent centred and family centred are current popular terms and choices of language used in education, health and social services to guide and inform practice for many different professionals. The discussions and debates at planning tables regarding the difference between involvement and engagement are frequent and vary based on the services’ mandates, focus and program delivery. A conversation with a parent at a community services planning event led to a discussion of parenting programs, and the parent shared that these were for her child, to help to teach her how to parent and what to do specifically when interacting with her child or managing her child’s behavior. She wanted to know where she went for the help and support that she needed for herself as an adult who was a parent? Her perspective is echoed and supported in the recognition that family support is a separate (though connected) part of ECE work requiring attention towards collaborative strategies and an acknowledgment that family support components included in programs for young children where the whole family is served are necessary for the child’s prospects to improve (FRP, 2011b, p. 8.)

Parents themselves are moving between services and systems that are increasingly complex and difficult to navigate, and are often unable to receive the services and support self-identified as important or necessary. When this is compounded with either a developmental concern with a child or other multiple psychosocial forces that can include homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, child abuse, foster care, substance abuse, racism, and other forms of discrimination (Cleek, 2012b, p. 208), the ability to work collaboratively with parents and recognize their inherent strengths, competencies and resiliency requires special skills and training. “The skills, knowledge and attitudes required of educators are very different from the skills, knowledge and attitudes which are required when addressing complex needs of families and communities” (FRP, 2011c, p. 9.) Collaboration and collaborative practice with parents requires
respect and trust, both for oneself and others, and a commitment to ongoing professional learning that links the knowledge and understanding of the parent into ongoing ECE practice.

**Collaboration and other Professionals**

The focus on service and system integration in community, health and educational services in recent years, consistently reflect the intention of improving outcomes for young children and their families and making services more effective within limited available resources. In 2006, Ontario used an integration index that moved programs and services through awareness, communication, cooperation and collaboration. In 2011 this was updated to an integration continuum to “better articulate the differences between collaboration and integration” (MYCS, 2011, p.2.) This is with respect to programs and services and how they collaborate or integrate at a systems level. “The terms coordination, cooperation, collaboration and integration are often used synonymously: however, all have different meaning and implications for practice” (Schmied, 2010a, p.3518.)

At an individual level where collaborative practice takes place between two or more people, research shows that effective collaborative practice is dependent on the individual’s views and experiences with collaboration and can be reflected on a continuum that starts with uni-disciplinary to multi-disciplinary, intra-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary through to trans-disciplinary practice (Cartmel, 2013; Hong, 2013; Nancarrow, 2013; Okoronkow, 2013; Romm, 1998; and Wong, 2013.) The significance of the individual’s responsibility in this reflects the degree of commitment involved especially when there is constant negotiating between different disciplines regarding the sharing of knowledge, understanding and decision making.
Schmied reported that some professional groups can experience considerable tension around the clarity of professional boundaries and that professional cultures can also act as barriers to effective collaboration and teamwork (Schmied, 2011b, p. 3522.) Okoronkwo identified the differences between giving priority to professional status in place of expertise as a hindrance to interdisciplinary collaborative practice (Okoronkwo, 2013a, p.174) in reference to doctors and nurses working together. Hong identified that safety and the development of professional relationships are key so that professional weaknesses or uncertainty regarding a situation or topic can be expressed (Hong, 2013a, p. 38.) Again, for the early childhood educator, an awareness and understanding of collaboration and collaborative practice, within the context of the other professions and professionals they are working with, is necessary to develop shared understanding and shared knowledge where ECE intersects with other professions. This is professional knowledge beyond child development, pedagogy, parenting and family dynamics. The need for continuing education to take place in collaborative models and through an “acceptance that there are multiple ways of understanding is necessary in order for ECEC professionals and practitioners to successfully advocate for their knowledge base alongside other disciplines” (Cartmel, 2013b, p.399.)

**Interdisciplinary Implications for ECE Practice in Ontario**

From an interdisciplinary perspective, the implications for ECE practice present opportunities and challenges that affect the practicing individual, those they practice with, the broader ECE sector, and other professions and sectors where the ECE profession and ECE knowledge integrate to support good outcomes for children, families and communities. The presence and evidence of integration, integrated services and interdisciplinary practice in education, social services and health care point towards an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinarity as services and systems co-construct knowledge and practice to improve broader
population outcomes. This in turn impacts on the culture of services, systems and the creation of policy.

The early childhood educator at an individual level through their interactions with children and families impact the relationships and outcomes for individual children and families. Understanding this impact in the broader context of community and society is valid, but the value of the impact for individual children and families should not be ignored. When there is a positive difference made at a micro level, it can only contribute to the collective efforts towards positive differences at a macro or meso level. The key is to be able to connect the micro level practices and outcomes to the macro level, the place where funders and policy makers pay attention. The quality of the relationships we have with others is interdisciplinary practice and should be understood in the context of outcomes when examining and developing policy.

Measuring outcomes of ECE practice on children, families and communities has been limited in formal research but is increasingly a focus to inform practice and policy. This presents opportunities for the ECE sector to contribute to the ECE knowledge base of professional practice and to integrate ECE knowledge into new knowledge with others. In Ontario, early childhood educators have the opportunity to be involved and engaged in action research through government funded initiatives that encourage transferring and sharing knowledge between communities (MCYS, 2013.) Although this does not always involve a rigorous academic process, it is research taking place within the inclusive context of culture and community, and “can be seen as a signal that the assessment of all research in society is – and must be – an ongoing process in which all those concerned about the effects of knowledge-construction might participate” (Romm, 1998b, p74.)
The literature reviewed for this paper indicates that shaping the thinking of the collaboration itself has significant impact on the outcomes of different collaborative practices, and that this needs to be a conscious and intentional process. This would apply regardless of where and who the collaborative practice takes place with; child, family or professional. The implications here for interdisciplinary training specific to collaboration and collaborative practice for affected professions could be addressed in disciplinary specific curriculums, but also in how, where and with who the curriculum is delivered. Hong identified “the importance of intentionally structuring and planning reflective space, and of supporting the development of the relationship between participating professionals” (Hong, 2013d, p. 37.) Schmied discovered that the “biggest challenge to collaboration and integration is for agencies/services to overcome the underlying tensions arising from their pre-existing assumptions about other services and issues of trust between services/professional groups” (Schmied, 2010d, p.3520.) If the experience of interdisciplinary collaboration and collaborative practice is ingrained between and amongst disciplines in initial education and training environments, one would hope that collaborative knowledge and practice becomes an ingrained expectation, both the why and how.

The recognition that there is a corresponding need for time and space for collaboration and collaborative practice to take place is not always aligned with the resources available to make this happen. The challenges for a sector that is essentially undergoing reconstruction and modernization results in competing attention and emphasis to a number of different moving parts. Professionalization is but one. Professionalization is a social process and as the ECE sector in Ontario continues to develop and professionalize, which includes the development of a stronger ECE identity, the recognition of the interdisciplinarity that exists within collaboration and collaborative practice, will...
in turn support the development of the profession as an integral component of educational, social service and health care practices, services and integrated systems.

**Conclusion**
The fundamental nature of ECE work is to support the healthy development of young children within the context of family and community. The holistic image of the child and the family and how they live and exist in communities should inform all professionals’ understanding of how to work with others for optimal or improved outcomes of healthy child development. Historically services and supports in communities have been developed along more discipline specific lines and lenses, but we are currently in a period of transformation that recognizes the value and wisdom of multiple voices, including recipients of the services.

The increased professionalization of ECE practice and the early childhood educator must proceed with an awareness of establishing the ECE profession as a larger entity within education, social services and health care environments because of what they have to contribute to their own discipline, but also because of what they have to contribute to the disciplines they intersect with. It should also be noted that the majority of sources and research on interdisciplinary practice that currently exists is from a professional perspective, and as knowledge is created specific to collaboration and collaborative practice, finding ways to include the perspectives, knowledge and understanding of the child and parent need to inform further development and understanding of interdisciplinarity.
References

[http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/boyd71.pdf](http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/boyd71.pdf)

Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada). (2011). Family is the foundation: Why family support and early childhood education must be a collaborative effort.


