



The conundrum of care in the construction of professional identity: A Foucauldian lens

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ABSTRACT

The notion of “professional” is built on a concept of traditionally male professions and patriarchal social orders. ECEC (early childhood education and care), however, is a female-dominated field characterised by its unique caring practice. This study investigated how a group of Australian early childhood preservice teachers presented themselves professionally on social media, in relation to respective infant (0-2) and kindergarten (3-5) practica. Data were drawn from focus group discussions about how the participants shared their practicum experiences on Instagram. The paper is guided by Foucault’s concepts of self writing. Findings are organised around four themes of self-writing processes: collecting, selecting, annotating, and managing time and tasks. Two narratives are revealed. In the context of the kindergarten placement, the posts constituted a journey of continuous improvement against all odds. In contrast, the infant placement experiences evoked a sense of struggle and renunciation. The paper concludes with implications for further study beyond the Australian context.

Keywords: professional identity, Foucault, care, preservice teacher, technologies of the self, self writing, ECEC, dual qualification

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, like other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the professionalisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is high on government policy agendas (OECD, 2019). This move is expected to raise ECEC’s professional standings and improve working conditions. Nonetheless, ECEC continues to be professionally undervalued (Levickis et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2023). The professions are patriarchal (Witz, 1992), and ECEC’s low professional status reflects such power orders. The notion of the professions is rooted in the image of the male professions in the public

(Dillabough, 1999). Contrarily, ECEC is a female-dominated field with unique caring tasks traditionally carried out by women in private homes.

Care refers to everything “we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). It involves meeting the needs of the infirm and the very young, cleaning, feeding and so on, which are essential to “all human activities” (Tronto, 2013, p. 27). In ECEC, care is a complex concept comprising personal, political, ideological, and practical aspects (Van Laere et al., 2012). For young children, especially infants and toddlers, care is indispensable to their growth, learning and everyday lives. Researchers (cf. Brenna, 2016; Quinones & Cooper, 2022; Recchia et al., 2018; Rockel, 2009) argue that care in ECEC is integral to professional practices at all levels. Notwithstanding these scholarly endeavours, the early years practitioners remain persistently divided by the age groups of the children under their care. The younger the children, the more salient “care” is deemed to be, the less emphasis is placed on the educational values intrinsic to that care, and the work is less valued professionally (Redman et al., 2021; Gould, 2022).

In Australia, an early childhood (children aged 0-8 years) initial teacher education program allows graduates to teach in pre-compulsory education (children aged 0-5 years) as well as foundation years in primary schools (children aged 5-8 years). However, preservice teachers often prefer working in schools rather than ECEC settings (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Gibson, 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). Today, the gap between care and education has widened even within ECEC. With an increasing emphasis on children’s academic achievements and outcomes, educators working with infants and toddlers are further excluded from being accepted as professionals (Redman et al., 2021). Likewise, in New Zealand, work with less obvious care elements is more privileged (Gould, 2022). Practices of care in ECEC are widely understood and judged in accordance with conventional concepts of care and the professions, so we ask here, how do conventional concepts influence the way preservice teachers present themselves as professionals? We address this question by focusing on preservice teachers’ reflections on how they shared their placement experiences on Instagram.

Placement refers to field practice, professional experience, or practicum where preservice teachers gain practical experiences in a school or early childhood setting. Participants in this study were enrolled in a four-year Early Childhood (0-8) Teacher Education program at a university in Victoria, Australia. Data were drawn from focus group discussions where the participants reflected on how they used Instagram to share their experiences during two respective placements—kindergartens (3-5) and infant (0-2) daycare. In existing research on preservice teachers’ professional identities, data has been gathered through surveys and focus group interviews (cf. Rouse et al., 2012) or interviews/questionnaires/placement report entries (cf. Boyd & Newman, 2019; O’Connor et al., 2015; Thorpe et al., 2011; White et al., 2016), where the participants offered their thoughts in private or faced the researchers or their classmates within the ECEC community. By introducing a social media component, the current study examined the gaze of a broader sense of others in the public. The actual Instagram posts were not included for data analysis. However, in focus group discussions, participants explained how they used social media to present themselves and connect with others, providing a generous amount of discursive material for scrutinising how care is compared to the conventional notion of the professions. Following Foucault (2020a), in the

current study, posting on Instagram is conceptualised as a form of self writing, a technology of the self. In the remainder of this paper, we will start with an overview of the Australian context of ECEC professionalisation. Following this, we will delve into how care is marginalised or excluded from the notion of the professions. We will then discuss the Foucauldian theoretical framework. The research findings are presented in four themes, reflecting the four processes of self writing: collecting, selecting, annotating, and managing time and tasks. Through these processes, the preservice teachers' professional identity was articulated in relation to their placements.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

OECD countries have undergone rapid professionalisation in the past decade, especially around practitioners' qualifications, knowledge, skills and working conditions as part of quality improvement (OECD, 2019). In Australia, Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), established in 2012, is an independent national authority that oversees the accreditation and quality of ECEC in agreement with the *National Quality Framework* that sets quality benchmarks for early childhood services. ACECQA (n.d.-a) recognises a range of qualifications, including certificates, diplomas, and three-year or four-year bachelor's degrees. By 2021, 26 per cent of ECEC staff held a bachelor's degree or higher (DESE, 2022), up from 11.9 per cent in 2016 (DESE, 2017). ECEC practitioners with a degree are known as early childhood teachers (ECTs).

Unlike Australian schools, where all teachers must hold a teaching degree, be registered, and meet the professional competencies stipulated in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2017), ACECQA (n.d.-b) does not have a mandatory requirement for ECT registration. However, in most of the states, ECT registration is compulsory. For example, in Victoria, since 30 September 2015, all ECTs are required to register with Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) – “an independent statutory authority for the teaching profession, whose primary function is to regulate members of the teaching profession to ensure quality teaching” (VIT, 2021, para 1). The APST, initially designed for school teachers, serves as the standard for ECT registration, exclusively available to graduates from accredited initial teacher education (ITE) programs. Childhood practitioners without a university degree might not be familiar with the APST document. Besides, the APST document employs terminology associated with conventional teaching and learning that do not always align with the distinct nature of care work in ECEC (Wu, 2021). As noted, “existing approval and accreditation processes for teaching degrees are inconsistent and, at times, school-centric” (ACECQA, 2022, p. 7).

The overview of the Australian context highlights the tension between care and education, and the divide between ECEC and the broader teaching profession. These divisions endure amidst the professionalisation of care and education. Numerous factors contribute to this situation. In this paper, we focus on one of them: the marginalisation of care in the realm of the professions. The following section examines how care is either omitted from or relegated to the periphery of the teaching profession, focusing on five dimensions: knowledge and skills, credentials, autonomy, time, and digital technology.

THE PLACE OF CARE IN THE PROFESSIONS

Boundaries between and within the professions mirror broader labour division and social stratification (Witz, 1992). “Most successful professions emerged as male, middle-class projects based on scientific knowledge and are organized to promote the self-interests of those involved and to protect their turf” (Dahle, 2012, p. 309). This hierarchy is reinforced by professional identity, which “refers to a set of externally ascribed attributes that are used to differentiate one group from another. ...a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself” (Sachs, 2001, p. 153). Among these attributes, ‘knowledge and skill’, ‘credentials’, and ‘autonomy’ are pivotal to distinguish the professionals from the general populace and differentiate different professions so to align within a hierarchical power order (MacDonald, 1995).

First, professional knowledge is assumed to be “abstract, generalizing and self-expanding” (MacDonald, 1995, p. 161). It eschews “excessive routinisation at the same time as maintaining relative inaccessibility of expertise” (Witz, 1992, p. 55). In contrast, caring routines are essential to young children’s growth and learning. Knowledge in ECEC is multi-disciplinary and “tacit” (Osgood, 2004, p. 19). Care is stigmatised in the professional hierarchy because caregiving is interpreted as bodily and emotional labour as opposed to learned intellectual work (Van Laere et al., 2014). Also, the need for care is viewed as a deficit that will diminish as children grow older. This conjecture “reinforces the hierarchical position in which children gradually ‘grow out’ of a more primitive stage of physical care to enter the more ‘human’ world of learning” (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 535).

Closely intertwined with professional knowledge are credentialing and certification processes. These mechanisms serve to monitor the level of skills and knowledge while safeguarding the entrenched interests and power of a particular group. For a profession to maintain its privilege, the credentials must be “difficult to obtain - intellectually, financially or socially” (MacDonald, 1994, p. 184). On the contrary, care, conceived as a feminine inner ability, is deemed accessible and inexpensive. Unlike teachers at school who must have a university degree, ECEC practitioners in Australia hold a range of qualifications as mention earlier (DESE, 2022).

While practitioners must adhere to codes and standards, autonomy is a pertinent component. Professional autonomy refers to practitioners’ freedom in decision-making that is not entirely reduced to mastery of standardised techniques or out of ethical considerations (MacDonald, 1995). Professional autonomy, to a certain extent, perpetuates the notion of professional exclusivity and dominance (Witz, 1992) –professional knowledge and expertise belongs to the experts. Contrarily, in ECEC, maternal knowledge is often conflated with professional judgements (Petersen, 2012; Wood, 2008). Despite being at the core of daily practices, care is discounted in policies and regulations, further undermining practitioners’ autonomy (Osgood, 2004; Rouse & Hadley, 2018).

Apart from the three traditional dimensions, two other facets have become salient: *time* and *digital technology*. Time is a precious resource. The current cost-effective approach to time—maximising outcomes within limited time and resources—means education is prioritised over care (Van Laere et al., 2012).

Infants with their unique developmental characteristics require ample time for care and exploration (Hammond, 2010), contradicting the dominant discourse of “standardisation, accountability and economic rationality” (Sims et al., 2018, p. 1). Moreover, experiences with time affect individuals’ subjectivity because they entail how people evaluate their own behaviours, practices and capabilities against various social norms and standards regarding time (Sugarman & Thrift, 2020). In this sense, managing and allocating time constitute a process of monitoring, regulating, or transforming the self.

Digital technology has become a form of professional literacy. In Australia, using ICT in teaching practice is written in the APST (AISTL, 2017). Mastery of digital technologies is a key component of kindergarten teachers’ professional identity (Schriever, 2021). Mertala's (2019) study demonstrates that technology is viewed as a "friend" when approached within an educational context, yet as a "foe" when seen through the lens of caregiving (p. 1229). This foe-or-friend dichotomy stems from the belief that older children need education, making technology appropriate, whereas it is undesirable to infants who primarily require care.

To sum up, the five aspects in the discourse of the professions where the status of care is ambivalent. This begs the question of how the discourses are practised and sustained. From a Foucauldian perspective, the discourses of the professions are established as truth—embodied in government policies, documents, and the social vernacular that subsequently shape people’s thoughts and actions:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth (Foucault, 1980, p. 38).

Truth is power. The “exercise of power is almost always accompanied by a manifestation of truth understood in this very broad sense” (Foucault, 1980, p. 6). The self is situated within and arises from a complex network of power dynamics. Foucault expounds on a range of techniques and protocols in this regard. In this paper, we will focus on one of them: self writing.

SELF WRITING AS A TECHNOLOGY OF THE SELF

Foucault (2020a) defines technologies of the self as practices and procedures that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being” (p.225). Through technologies of the self, individuals present or transform the self according to certain models. One such manifestation in educational research is the self-entrepreneurial teacher who is self-governing, individualistic and highly competitive (cf. Ball, 2003; Osgood, 2004; Sachs, 2001). On the other hand, teachers can only do so within the confinement of prescribed regulations and standards (Osgood, 2006). This is a form of “governing at a distance” –power is not so much imposed directly from outside but rather arises within the self to govern oneself (Rose, 1999). The current study

contributes to this body of literature by exploring self writing as a technology of the self.

Self writing refers to the process by which individuals use writing as a technology to operate on the self to change or transform oneself. Foucault (2020a, 2020b) examines this practice from two contexts. In the Greco-Roman traditions, the practice was around “a precept: *epimeleisthai sautou*”, “care of the self”, “to be concerned, to take care of yourself” (Foucault, 2020a, p. 226). It was a practice of freedom—“which individual freedom—or civic liberty, up to a point—was reflected [se réfécchie] as an ethics” (Foucault, 2020c, p. 284). Conversely, “with Christianity, achieving one’s salvation is also a way of caring for oneself. But in Christianity, salvation is attained through the renunciation of self” (p. 285). This culture of confession has now evolved into presenting a new positive self “without renouncing oneself” (Foucault, 2020a, p. 249).

Self writing, “the act of writing for oneself and for others” plays “a considerable role” in the “training of the self by oneself” (Foucault, 2020b p.208). Different forms of self writing existed in late antiquity. For example, *humponémata*, journals or notebooks “constituted a material record of things read, heard or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation” (p. 209). Correspondence—written exchanges with others—made the writer “present” to the reader. Self writing serves different purposes across different situations (Foucault, 2020b, p. 221):

It (*humponémata*) was a matter of constituting oneself as a subject of rational action through the appropriation, the unification, and the subjectivation of a fragmentary and selected already said; in the case of the monastic notation of spiritual experiences, it will be a matter of dislodging the most hidden impulses from the inner recesses of the soul, thus enabling oneself to break free of them. In the case of the epistolary account of oneself, it is a matter of bringing into congruence the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself when one measures one’s everyday actions according to the rules of a technique of living.

For Foucault, self writing in the Greco-Roman tradition was a venture to cultivate an ethical and aesthetic self, as demonstrated in Seneca’s correspondence. While agreeing with Foucault’s explanation, Svoboda (2020) offers an alternative interpretation and argues that Seneca’s letters could also be understood as “a plausible response to the problem of suffering in daily life” (p. 1). The debate around self writing underscores its versatile nature in practice.

Today’s media technology of self-expression bears a striking resemblance to “technologies of the self over the centuries” depicted by Foucault (Friesen, 2017, p. 12). Siles (2012) interviewed web bloggers and diarists of the 1990s, at the onset of the internet age. He maintains that “the emergence of user identities on the Internet must be thought of as a process of mutual configuration between particular types of artifacts and certain practices for fashioning the self” and this understanding broadens “our understanding of technologies of the self” (p. 418). Weisgerber and Butler (2016) contend that digital self writing resembles *humponémata*, “an exercise of self-cultivation” (p. 1347) and a practice of self-care. Online and offline identities shape each other—“it is not a matter of existing before or after but rather one of the process – one of becoming oneself through

self-care” (p. 1353). Sheldahl-Thomason (2019) reminds us that although self writing has the potential to challenge disciplinary power, its effectiveness can be restricted without a supportive network.

Instagram offers a digital platform akin to *humponémata* and correspondence. Like *humponémata*, posting on Instagram entails curating materials and information – “a material record of things read, heard or thought” (Foucault, 2020b, p. 209). Through a series of techniques in content curation—collecting, selecting, and annotating artefacts to project the self, the digital self is formed and transformed (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016). Posting on Instagram is a practice of correspondence because the content creators are present to the audience (readers/followers) who would respond to the posted materials. In the present study, preservice teachers were prompted to reflect on how they used Instagram to share their placement experiences. In this way, they would consider how to present themselves as preserve teachers through digital self writing practices.

THE STUDY

The current study was part of a larger project where preservice teachers enrolled in ITE programs in early childhood, primary and secondary education, shared their placement experience and connected on Instagram. The preservice teachers were asked to post on Instagram as an innovative initiative to fulfil the requirements of graduate attributes, especially communication skills using different media, mastery of digital technologies and professional judgement. Their Instagram activities were not part of the assessments, nor did they contribute to the grades. The research project collaborated with this initiative to explore the practices and perspectives of preservice teachers throughout the process. Within the early childhood cohorts, unique characteristics emerged in the ways they expressed and articulated their professional identity, as we will elaborate later.

The participants were studying towards a four-year degree in early childhood (0-8), which would enable graduates to work in both ECEC and school settings. All participants were female, undertaking two respective placements: infant (0-2) placement and kindergarten placement (3-5) (figure 1). Preservice teachers on infant placement (G1 & G2) were in their midway through the study, most of them also already had a field practice in primary school foundation years (5-8). The kindergarten placement (G3) cohort were in their final year.

The study received ethical approval from the university which delivered the four-year degree, and is not named in line with ethical approval to retain anonymity of students and the degree program. Participants were enlisted through email invitations and provided consent by engaging in an online survey regarding their practices of social media. They subsequently shared photos and details pertaining to their practicum experiences on Instagram after gaining consent from their placement settings. Detailed written instructions for gaining consent from parents/families and their placement centres, as well as a matrix with different scenarios, were given to preservice teachers. The aim for posting on social media was to focus on their own practices that should be ethical and professional, for example, no real names or other identifiable details/images should be shared online. Preservice teachers had to exercise sound professional judgment when navigating the intricate landscape of professional and ethical

obligations and requirements in the real world. A focus group discussion was conducted at the end of the professional experience. The data were collected by research team members who were not directly involved in placements.

Abbreviation	Focus group	Number of participants
G1	Infant placement 1	12
G2	Infant placement 2	11
G3	Kindergarten placement	13

Figure 1: Focus groups and participant number

Ideas that emerged from focus group discussions are results of group interactions. “Conformity of opinion within focus group data is therefore an emergent property of the group context, rather than an aggregation of the views of individual participants” (Sim, 1998, p. 348). Dominant voices in a group could obscure individual views, producing biases (Breen, 2006). Through a Foucauldian lens, the self is situated in a matrix of power relationships, and the current study intends to capture such ‘biases’, thereby understanding how professional identity is embedded in power relationships and social interactions.

CURATING THE PROFESSIONAL SELF

Data from the focus group discussions are presented in four interconnected themes: collecting, selecting, annotating, and managing time and tasks. They are identified because curating and assembling materials are key to digital writing (Weisgerber and Butler, 2016). In the current study, the participants collected—gathered raw materials; selected—screened what is worth posting; annotated—explained and justified the reasons for their action or the lack of; and finally—managed time for curation. The curating process required participants to pay “intense attention to” what they thought and did— a series of practices and exercises by which the self is articulated and transformed (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016, p. 1341). In Foucault’s (2020b) words, the participants reflected on “the act of writing for oneself and for others’ in the ‘training of the self by oneself” (p. 208).

Collecting

In Australia, as mentioned earlier, ITE graduates must demonstrate their competency against the APST (AISTL, 2017). It is a common practice for preservice teachers to collect their practice evidence during placement following the APST. Therefore, gathering evidence to showcase their professional abilities is not a novel idea. Most participants (over 90%) already used Instagram for personal communication. The participants reiterated that Instagram is a “public” place and that posts related to their placements should be “objective” and “professional”, putting down the grand rules for “a set of ascribed attributes” that define the professional identity (Sachs, 2001, p. 153).

The participants agreed that Instagram could help them build a professional profile and networking useful for their future careers:

I find it very engaging using Instagram...I think it is a positive way of demonstrating yourself—as who you are. (G1)

It (Instagram) is helpful if we use it as what we are supposed to. (G2)

At first, I didn't think this (Instagram) project would work for me... But I realised that this actually helped me feel less isolated because I know what other people are doing. ...So, it is very good for professional use. (G3)

Even though there was a consensus on the value of using Instagram for professional purposes, the preservice teachers responded differently to their placements in Kindergarten and Infant settings.

For the kindergarten placement cohort, their experiences were worth collecting: "I really used it for remembering my experience, and how I set things up. I was surprised by how creative I am because (I thought) I was not very creative" (G3). The experiences would benefit others. For example, a preservice teacher commented: "I was at the placement, and they had lots of resources for us to use. That was amazing' to share on Instagram" (G3).

However, the collecting process was perceived in a different light for infant placements. The preservice teachers lamented that their mentors "didn't understand" or "did not use" Instagram:

I feel like early childhood is an industry that is (pause), not really (pause) going along with 21st-century learning. In primary (schools), all the teachers use Instagram, even some older teachers. For early childhood, it (social media) is a foreign concept. (G1)

Other preservice teachers explained that because they work together in the room all day, early childhood educators do not need social media to connect, unlike teachers in schools who work alone in the classroom (G1). Another reckoned: "In primary schools, technologies are (explicitly) embedded in the curriculum. So, they are already doing more with technologies" (G1). No one regarded digital technology as essential for infants because care was prioritised. This viewpoint corresponds to the notion that technology is seen as an adversary to care but an ally to education (Mertala, 2019). While technology was not considered imperative for infants, the perceived tech-unsavvy stance was judged to lag behind "21st-century learning", making it difficult to collect materials.

Selecting

Posting on social media involves selecting the appropriate content (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016). In the current study, materials fitting for posting, as the preservice teachers stated earlier, must be "objective" and "professional", which were the yardsticks to distinguish "appropriate" from "inappropriate" or "professional" from "unprofessional". Accordingly, the kindergarten group drew out suitable content from their placement, whereas the infant group had to distance themselves from "unprofessional" practices.

The kindergarten cohort were eager to share their teaching activities. One preservice teacher provided an example of posting on Instagram stories about children participating in science learning(G3). The preservice teachers described how teaching and learning with young children were as serious as that in schools. Meanwhile, they stressed that kindergartens are not watered-down schools. They

took pride in “learning through play” that was “fun” and “creative” (G3). One participant took to Instagram to dispel public misconceptions about ECEC:

Many of my friends think jobs in early childhood are easy. It is not a high-level job. When they saw my Instagram posts with photos and reflections, they saw the programs that I have implemented, (otherwise) they wouldn't have understood the complexity of the work. It is more than playing or having fun. (G3)

Preservice teachers on kindergarten placement were in their final year. They could be more confident than the infant placement groups. However, such a pattern based on children's age was not noted among the primary or secondary cohorts in the larger project. A plausible explanation could be that care is viewed as a deficit to be eventually overcome when children are older (Van Laere et al., 2012). Kindergarteners, free from the need for constant physical care, are ready to learn. “Learning through play”, skewed towards ‘learning’ could potentially be refashioned into an intellectual endeavour as opposed to the manual labour of care (Van Laere et al., 2014). In this way, knowledge and skills become conceptual rather than habitual (MacDonald, 1995), plus having “fun” and being “creative”.

Unlike those on the kindergarten placement, the infant placement groups reported struggling to find appropriate materials. A preservice teacher on infant placement said she did not post on Instagram because she “did not want to be associated with that kind of practice” (G1). She explained, for example, that her mentor would not initiate any changes to enhance infants' learning because the mentor tried to avoid possible disagreements with parents: “My mentor said, oh, I just don't want to do this because I don't want to have this kind of conversation with the parents” (G1). Others concurred that their mentors were not always confident in dealing with parents' demands.

In comparison, teachers in primary schools were seldom challenged because they were perceived to have the authority (G1). These statements hinted at the idea of professional autonomy. The preservice teachers said that primary school teachers are recognised for their specialised knowledge and skills that parents, who are considered laypeople, do not have. In contrast, because care in ECEC is positioned as dichotomous to intellectual work (Van Laere et al., 2014), educators performing the caring work do not have the professional authority or ‘inaccessibility’ (Witz, 1992). To some preservice teachers, their infant placement mentors lacked confidence not only in dealing with parents but also in assessing the preservice teachers' performance. Some complained that their mentors hardly wrote anything on the practicum report, unlike their primary school mentors, who needed “extra pages” to write comments (G1, G2). One described,

I didn't have much feedback from my mentor or other educators. I am doing a degree, and they have a diploma or certificate III. When I asked for feedback, sometimes they said: “You know more than me (because you will have a degree)”. (G2)

It is worth mentioning that not all mentors at kindergartens hold a degree. After all, less than one-third of the ECEC workforce has a bachelor's qualification (DESE, 2022). Interestingly, the issue of credentials was not raised in the kindergarten placement focus group. This implies that the curating process is

selective (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016). Materials are chosen with careful consideration of individuals' interpretation and negotiation of various norms or "truths".

Annotating

Curation is more than collecting or selecting artefacts. It is a sense-making process encompassing individuals' reflection and annotation (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016). As mentioned, while the infant placement groups opted to stay away from Instagram, the kindergarten placement cohort embraced it. Decisions were made based on interpretations of what counts as professional rather than a reality *per se*. When encountering challenges, the kindergarten group were inclined to accentuate positive facets to present themselves as professionals. The infant cohort's professionalism, to the contrary, was brought out through "the renunciation of the self" (Foucault, 2020a, p. 285)—renouncing "unprofessional" or inappropriate elements.

The kindergarten stories were upbeat and resilient, even when reality collided with virtual imageries: "When you post, you only pick one or two good things...and other people wouldn't know what else we did" (G3). One agreed, "Nobody ever posted their concerns on Instagram or to ask for help" (G3). Another elaborated:

I thought that social media was supposed to be positive. I looked at everyone's Instagram, and everyone was doing a really good job. Especially this placement, it was a bit difficult for me. I didn't post anything. I felt I needed to...(G3)

The challenges, if any, were not presented as problematic but obstacles to overcome:

I was stressed with my placement, and I didn't have much time...We must be positive...everyone has different ways of doing things. (G3)

Preservice teachers rationalised that they should be "positive" "during the final kindergarten placement despite difficulties and constraints. The reiteration of "being positive" echoes the new culture of a "positive self without renunciation" (Foucault, 2020a, p. 249).

Nevertheless, the narratives about the infant placement were different. One issue was about mentors' credentials. Credentialing is one of the key watermarks to differentiate and to maintain ingroup privileges of the professions (MacDonald, 1994). Care, conflated with maternal or feminine instincts (Petersen, 2012; Wood, 2008), is not traditionally regarded as requiring intellectual efforts (Van Laere et al., 2014). In ECEC settings, educators with lower levels of credentials tend to be assigned to work with infants and toddlers (cf. Jackson, 2020; Rouse et al., 2012; Van Laere et al., 2012). The infant placement groups raised the credential issue often in connection with mentors' knowledge of the APST. Because the cohort was studying towards a dual (early childhood and primary) teaching degree, they were required to demonstrate their competence aligning with the APST, and their mentors would assess their practice against the APST.

Most of the infant placement mentors did not have a bachelor's degree and, therefore, were unfamiliar with the document. One preservice teacher summed up the situation:

We are doing a Bachelor's, and we went to a room with a diploma-qualified mentor who doesn't know much about what needs to be done (about the APST). I had a problem with getting my report completed because they didn't have a degree-qualified person leading the room. The staff in the room shared the (mentoring) role, but no one was taking responsibility to finish my report...It was a report that they had never done before...So, three educators ended up writing my report. (G1)

The infant placement groups did not openly consider their professional experiences professionally worthwhile, even if some "loved" working with this age group and "enjoyed" the experiences (G1, G2). Some researchers (e.g., Thrope et al., 2011) suggest that preservice teachers with positive practical experience would likely consider entering the field. O'Connor et al. (2015) caution that this may not always be the case. In the current study, participants with an enjoyable placement did not contemplate a career with infants. This suggests that experiences are influenced not only by their inherent nature but also by the connotations shaped by professional discourses.

Managing time and tasks

The process of curation, collecting, selecting, and annotating requires time and is time-consuming. The enormous amount of information in cyberspace with limited cyber time means one must prioritise what to post (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016). Time must be managed and scheduled, and scheduling is a disciplinary technology. Activities are controlled through timetables to "establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition" (Foucault, 1991, p. 149). In the current study, time was felt and dealt with differently. Subsequently, professional identities were formed and presented differently. Preservice teachers on kindergarten placement, holding time constraints as an obstacle to be overcome, aimed to demonstrate their shrewd professional judgement and time management skills. Yet, the demand for time became overwhelming for infant placements, and consequently, it was deemed unworthy of investing in. In this sense, the professionalism in the infant placement groups was expressed through "the renunciation of the self" (Foucault, 2020a, p. 285).

The kindergarten placement cohort talked about time pressure with a "can-do" attitude:

Right after I finished my day, I just posted some photos and some reflections, so I could go home without worrying about it. (G3)

I posted when I was waiting for the bus...(G3)

When the children were sleeping, I did planning and wrote my reflections and observations. Then I posted at lunch break...In the morning, I reflected on what went well (the day before) ...because at night, I would be too exhausted. (G3)

Even for those who did not enjoy social media or viewed it as ‘extra work’, there were no blunt protests as expressed in the infant placement groups:

Personally, I am not into social media. So, it is a big deal (for me). I used Instagram to get ideas (from others). But I didn’t post much. (G3)

Those on kindergarten placement were in their final year, and they might be more mature in managing their time than the infant placement cohort. However, this pattern, again, was not evident in the primary and secondary groups.

For the infant placement groups, although the pace was “slow”, time was perceived, paradoxically, to be limiting: “I just didn’t have the time (to post). Every day after my placement, I had to write up reflections and collect evidence. I had to work until midnight” (G2). In addition, information on social media was overwhelming and time-consuming: “I found it a bit hard to post.... If you don’t look at it for a couple of days, there would be too much to read” (G1). For those who already had a diploma and had been working with infants, the days were repetitive. Here, caring routines were “tacit” (Osgood, 2004, p. 19) and were of less professional value compared to more “abstract” knowledge (McDonald, 1995, p. 161), such as learning through play. The preservice teachers evaluated their experience through the gaze of others (Foucault, 2020b) using the conventional definition of the professions as a central point of reference. One participant said:

So much I was doing was new on my primary placement. There was so much I could articulate to people and so much I wanted to know. While here (the infant placement), OK, it is just small sequences happening during the day. (G1)

Another agreed:

I already have my diploma... I felt, yeah, this (the infant placement) is my normal job. Is there anything that people want to hear about the job day in and day out when you work as a Diploma (holder) in a room? (G1)

White et al. (2016) contend that infant practica is problematic because preservice teachers are often ill-equipped due to common oversights in the specialist knowledge of the younger group in ITE programs. Curiously, in the current study, the preservice teachers’ frustration was about “excessive routines” associated with care as opposed to perceived “abstract” professional knowledge (McDonald, 1995, p. 161), not the knowledge by itself. These sentiments echo the findings of Rouse et al. (2012), wherein preservice teachers complained that their infant placement did not provide any new insights. In the current study, even those who believed they had learned useful skills and that the care was important, did not see much worth sharing on social media because the pace was “slow” (G2). The participants agreed that the “slow” pace was conducive to infants’ development. Yet, it was at odds with the demand of social media, which requires a continuous stream of fresh content. In this context, the “slow” rhythm, a signature of infant care and pedagogy (cf. Hammond, 2010; Sims et al., 2018),

was not “going along with 21st-century learning” (G1). The findings illustrate that time is a technology of the self that affects preservice teachers’ professional identity formation and presentation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Traditionally seen as a woman’s job, care is stigmatised in the conventional understanding of the professions. The care and education divide has manifested itself based on children’s age. The younger the child, the more care is required, and the less the work is professionally valued. Despite the body of scholarly literature earnestly promoting care as integral to education and professional practice, the reality tells a different tale. We focused on how the practice of care is valued against the conventional understanding of the professions in five aspects: professional knowledge, credentialing and certificating, autonomy, time, and digital technology. In all the five dimensions of the professions, care is marginalised, if not entirely discounted.

The conundrum of care laid bare on social media when we interrogated preservice teachers’ identity formation through a Foucauldian lens—self writing as a technology of the self. Through the processes of self writing: collecting, selecting, annotating, and managing time and tasks for posting (or not posting) on Instagram, the preservice teachers articulated the professional self to the public, imagined or real. Experiences of the kindergarten placement are filled with a sense of triumph and resilience, embracing what a good teacher ought to be. In contrast, narratives of the infant placement have an undertone of renunciation, renouncing what a good teacher ought not to be.

The account of the self “is a matter of bringing into congruence the gaze of the other” (Foucault, 2020a, p. 225). The preservice teachers talked about their views of the mentors’ practices, parents’ perceptions of the early childhood practitioners, and how others—their friends and a general audience—might judge their Instagram posts with reference to “a set of ascribed attributes” that distinguishes professionals from non-professionals (Sachs, 2001, p. 153). Preservice teachers do not passively reproduce the dominant discourse. Instead, when facing the public, where care is perceived to be stigmatised, preservice teachers have to rely on dominant discourses to defend themselves intentionally or unintentionally. To present themselves as professionals, the preservice teachers selectively shun the care elements. Hence, the promotion of care does not automatically elevate the professional standing of caring. In fact, the professionalisation of ECEC has widened the gap between education and care (Redman et al., 2021). In ITE, material or social changes, not just rhetorical, are necessary to resist the hegemonic power (Wu & Oxworth, 2022). This would require changing societal attitudes and the discourses that devalue care. Likewise, in the digital world, support networks are needed to nourish a virtual identity to counter prevailing norms (Sheldahl-Thomason, 2019). With the ubiquity of social media in our lives, we call for further research on professional identity formation both online and offline. More studies are needed to understand the nuances of how social media or other digital consumptions influence preservice teachers’ perceptions of the teaching profession offline and how offline experiences impact their online activities. Further research could also explore how supportive digital communities challenge the dominant discourses of the professions, bringing changes to offline experiences.

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