

PROFESSIONALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

### PROFESSIONALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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In this explorative research project, data from questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group were collected and analyzed in order to explore aspects of the self-perception of professionalism in the field of early childhood education. Data were analyzed using three overarching themes that emerged in the literature: defining the profession, action and advocacy in the profession, and self-perceptions of early childhood educators. The data revealed that these three themes have significant inconsistencies that contribute to a state of disequilibrium and dissonance experienced among early childhood educators, creating obstacles to the move toward greater professionalism in the field of early childhood education.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Professionalism in early childhood education has recently received considerable attention (Caulfield, 1997). One of the challenges of the field of early childhood education is to raise professional competence and enhance credibility (Rodd, 1997). With the very recent publication of early childhood educator competencies (CSCCE, 2008), it has become an even more pressing issue amongst early childhood educators to move toward greater professionalism. There are common aspects of professionalism that differentiate early childhood education from other fields (Caulfield, 1997). These aspects of professionalism are not determined by educators in the field, and therefore it is a challenge for early childhood educators to define their profession. Aspects of program quality are related to dimensions within professionalism, yet not much research exists with regard to how early childhood educators perceive their own levels of professionalism. Because of the lack of adequate research, self-perceptions of professionalism have not been taken into consideration when planning or implementing movement toward professional growth and development. Although criteria exist that outline aspects of professionalism, it is of interest to better understand the beliefs and attitudes of the early childhood workforce with regard to how they feel about their own professionalism. The research in this thesis was conducted to try to gain a better understanding of the self-perceptions of professionalism amongst early childhood

educators. This study uses several aspects of data collection in order to explore aspects of professionalism in early childhood education.

In the following chapters of this thesis, I identify some of the self-perceptions of early childhood educators regarding professionalism. In Chapter Two, I synthesize an understanding of the field of early childhood education and provide a current review of the literature in the area of professionalism in the field of early childhood education.

In Chapter Three, I describe the methodology that I used in order to explore aspects of professionalism among early childhood educators. This chapter includes the context in which the research was conducted as well as my own experiences which led me to my research. It also includes a brief description of the participants, the modes in which I conducted my research, and the themes that emerged in both the literature as well as in the results.

In Chapter Four, I present the results obtained from the content analysis of themes expressed by participants in their descriptions of aspects of professional development. The results are depicted using demographic information, descriptive statistics, and illustrative responses of themes found in the content analysis. I present these results in three sections. The first section illustrates the results from the questionnaire portion of the study. The second section highlights responses collected from individual interviews. The third section incorporates responses collected from a focus group. Both the interview and focus group were categorized using three

themes prevalent in the research: definition of the profession, action and advocacy in the profession, and self-perceptions of early childhood educators.

In Chapter Five, I provide an analysis of the results illustrated in Chapter Four.

The analysis is presented in five sections which include the questionnaires as a separate section, the three overarching themes, and a summary. In the first section, I offer an analysis of the questionnaire themes. In the second section, I analyze aspects of the defining the profession which include both interview and focus group responses. In the third section, I analyze responses related to action and advocacy within the profession. In the fourth section, I provide analysis of aspects of self-perceptions of early childhood educators, and in the fifth and final section, I provide a summary of the analysis.

In Chapter Six, I discuss the conclusions based on my research. I also provide recommendations for expanding on this research, the limitations of this study, implications for future research, and suggestions to promote professionalism in early childhood education.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Introduction*

The care and well being of children are core values within the American family (Beekman, 1977). Through historical, ideological, and social fluctuations, this care and well being have moved from a private to a public issue, as children are no longer considered contributors to individual family wealth (Sanson & Wise, 2001) but are currently recognized as valuable national resources (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990). Any debate over the care of children raises political, ideological, and developmental concerns (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990). Changes in ideas of caring for children are related to social and economic conditions (Clarke-Stewart, 1989). Over the last century, many factors have had a dramatic impact on the context of traditional families. The social context of parenting, which has been altered by significant historical events, along with the changing role of mothers and fathers within the family unit has a direct effect on who cares for children and how they do it (Sanson & Wise, 2001). Economic factors also greatly influence decisions about the care of children (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). High levels of mobility away from family and an ever increasing need for income take parents away from home and contribute to the erosion of the care of children from within the family unit (Sanson & Wise, 2001). This move away from the family unit and parental care provides the impetus for the care of children to emerge in other forms. This

literature review will outline the historical aspects of child rearing and the ways they are intimately related to contemporary issues of children in care outside of the home. The care of children outside the home has roots that lie in the traditions of social welfare and education for the very young, with the basic functions being to promote health and well being of children, enhance the employability of parents, and improve economic health and productivity of the nation at large (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990). This review of the literature will identify the characteristics of the people who care for young children in this capacity and examine their training, education, and experience as they relate to quality measures in the context of care. Furthermore, the literature review will identify aspects of professional development and professionalism that support those who care for children in an emerging profession.

#### *Early Childhood Education: A Historical Perspective*

In order to understand the ways in which the care of children has evolved in the United States, it is important to look at the historical constructs of child rearing and childhood. Theoretical understanding and advancement in the realms of psychological and social development changed the way that parents approach caring for and learning with their children (Lomax, Kagan & Rosenkrantz, 1978). Two developmental theories that are dominant within issues related to child rearing are mechanistic and organismic development, or more simply, nature vs. nurture (Sanson & Wise, 2001). In looking at the history of child rearing in the United States, there are recurring themes that incorporate these developmental theories and more: a

strong concern about child-rearing, a belief that human beings are perfectible through better child rearing, an eagerness by parents to listen to the advice of experts, a belief that young infants and children should be educated in schools or day care centers by experts competing with the belief that infants belong at home with their mothers, and a commitment to social reform competing with the conviction that families should be autonomous (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). This has been demonstrated historically from Colonial times through the Civil War and on into contemporary approaches to raising children (Beekman, 1977; Clarke-Stewart, 1998; Youcha, 1995). In conjunction with these historical themes, there are significant contemporary social factors that have greatly influenced beliefs about children. Social trends that have changed the cultural context of children's development include women's increased participation in the labor force, changes in the presence and role of fathers, and an increase in the cultural diversity in the United States (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Significant historical events such as the women's movement, the availability of contraceptive pills, higher levels of education for women, the evolution of feminist theory, and changes in women's social class have all contributed to changes in the way children are raised (Sanson & Wise, 2001). None of these events, however, has had as much impact as the unprecedented numbers of women entering the labor force after World War II (Coheny & Sok, 2007). Regardless of marital status, women's labor participation steadily increased in the last three decades, while men's participation in the labor force has actually declined (US Bureau of Labor

Statistics, 2005c). Of particular note is the increase in number of women with husbands present in the home who have increased their labor force participation while still having children (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). Although women's participation in the labor force has stabilized in the last 5 years (Coheny & Sok, 2007), over 70% of women are currently participating in the labor force, and it is projected that number will increase in the future (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Dual-income families, with both father and mother employed, are also fast becoming a trend in American labor statistics (Winkler, 1998). This increase in women's employment, coupled with a shift in the mother's role from primary caregiver to co-parent (Cabrera et al., 2000), provides a basis for an increased need for non-maternal care, and more often than not, care outside of the immediate family (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990).

The role of father within the family unit is often thought of in a traditional sense, as head of household or breadwinner (Winkler, 1998). However, fathers' roles and those of other men in children's lives are changing and will continue to change in the current context of cultural values and family ideologies (Cabrera et al., 2000). Mothers as primary-caregivers foster the presumption that the father-child relationship has little impact on a child's development, and developmental theorists have reinforced these assumptions about the lack of importance of the father-child relationships (Cabrera et al., 2000). However, men in some ways have increased their parenting role by living longer and marrying women closer to their own age, and they are more likely to live with children who are not their own (Goldsheider,

Hogan & Bures, 2001). There has been an increase in the labor force by families with women as the head of household (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a), which could also demonstrate an increase in the absence of fathers in the lives of many children. Men, however, do play a significant role in the lives of children, comprising 15% of the single parent population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Men are more likely to live with children of whom they are not the biological fathers (Goldsheider, Hogan & Bures, 2001), and men are increasingly taking on domestic and child-rearing activities which leads to increases in the responsibilities of organizing and planning their children's lives (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Recent changes in rates of immigration impact familial roles and child rearing through the racial and cultural diversity of families with children (Cabrera et al., 2000). Over 27% of the current United States population is foreign born with the majority originating from Asia and Latin America, and over 42% of citizens over 5 years of age speak a language other than English (US Census Bureau, 2006). The cultural diversity of such a large percentage of the population would suggest that familial roles and the care of children might change with the population. Fathers' roles are particularly defined through specific cultural contexts and may also change (Cabrera et al., 2000). Expansion of the traditional roles of fatherhood is met with much debate because of the large variety of cultural contexts (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). As the framework of the traditional family shifts with changing social and economic times, so do the roles within the family, particularly the role of who cares for the children.

Changes in beliefs about child rearing have been linked to a secularization of American values and economic prosperity; economically challenging times have moved society to take care of children when their families could not (Lomax, Kagan & Rosenkrantz, 1978). In Colonial times, apprenticeship was one of the earliest forms of non-parental care in the United States in which poor children were often apprenticed to keep them from being public charges (Youcha, 1995). The early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the first informal infant schools whose primary focus was literacy for the children of poor working families and an attempt at social reform; middle class families saw the advantages of the infant schools and enrolled their children for advancement reasons, both social and academic (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). At this time, kindergartens emerged overseas in Germany and eventually in the United States (NAEYC, 2001). The latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw population growth, industry growth, and an increase in communication systems, and with that, a social reform agenda that targeted industrial workers (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). Believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, the Boston Infant School opened in 1828 (Zigler & Lang, 1991). The infant schools provided child care for poor and working mothers (Zigler & Lang, 1991), and eventually day nurseries and infant crèches were established by philanthropic agencies to meet the needs of immigrant families (NAEYC, 2001). The focus of the day nursery was health, orderliness, and manners, and they were not considered desirable; government influence pushed to provide mothers' pensions because day nurseries were considered worse than keeping mothers at home (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). In Western

society, the human sciences – primarily psychiatry and psychology – assumed roles of counsel to parents (Lomax, Kagan & Rosenkrantz, 1978). During this time, middle-class mothers were influenced by the works of Hall, Dewey, Pestalozzi, and Freud, and an idealized view of motherhood emerged emphasizing the importance of the mother's role (Clarke-Stewart, 1998) which historically had been of particular importance when social values and traditions seemed threatened (Lomax, Kagan & Rosenkrantz, 1978). Going into World War II, Watson and Freud influenced society to sync family methods and scientific principles, believing that children needed to be more detached from their parents and have more rigid schedules (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). Clearly defined male and female roles emerged as society took over roles that traditionally had taken place in the home such as education, religious training, and vocational instruction (Youcha, 1995). During World War II, Congress provided money to keep Work Progress Administration nurseries open, which had served as a national preschool program during the Great Depression, to meet the needs of women employed in the wartime defense industry, although these federally supported programs were viewed as needed only during wartime (NAEYC, 2001). The child care system established during WWII was justified because parents' efforts were diverted to serve a nation in crisis; day care centers all but disappeared immediately after WWII (Zigler & Lang, 1991). At this time, changes in political climate and scientific research pushed for child rearing by professionals, and education was seen as a solution to social problems (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). Middle-class and wealthy families, in hopes of advancing their children's learning, utilized

private nursery schools, and educators noticed that children entered school with a wide range of educational experiences (Zigler & Lang, 1991). It was at this time that Head Start was initiated as an anti-poverty measure under the Office of Economic Opportunity (NAEYC, 2001). Themes present in the early infant schools emerged again in Head Start: commitment to the total child, health, nutrition, social learning, and education (Zigler & Lang, 1991). The economic slump and social reform of the 1970s saw an initial push for parent education, with an eventual decline in parent education programs and the abandonment of untested strategies, with Head Start being an exception (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). A number of professional organizations, both public and private, funded studies looking at various aspects of non-maternal care and the effects of child care (NAEYC, 2001). The effects of non-parental care upon children, whether negative or positive, were increasing because of the increase in the use of non-parental care (Browne Miller, 1990). The latter half of the last century saw a change in parent expectations based on socioeconomic status, a focus on children who were considered at-risk, attachment issues, and mother-child relationships (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). Today we see a decline in parent education, a continued focus of research on at-risk and/or marginalized groups of children and parents, and a society concerned with safety and behavioral issues with children (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). The care of children has left the exclusive domain of the family and now coexists in the overlapping realms of family, society, and politics (Browne Miller, 1990). With family policy in the government closely tied to an uncertain economy and conservative politics (Clarke-Stewart, 1998), and maternal

employment and earnings predicted to become necessities in the family unit (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990), the need for non-parental care is reincarnated in a new field and profession, that of child care and early childhood education.

### *Childcare Choices*

The meaning of child care has evolved to mean non-parental care, and it is generally understood as the care given to children by adults other than their parents while they are working, seeking work, attending school, or attending training programs (Zigler & Lang, 1991). Contemporary child care is a mixed economy of varied and diverse settings (Browne Miller, 1990). Useful information concerning child care is a challenge to obtain because of the wide variety of settings, a lack of systematic data collection, and few bodies of research with rigorous evaluation processes (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990).

There are informal and formal child care options for working families. Informal, unregulated care arrangements can come in the form of care by relatives, nannies, and baby-sitters occurring both in and out of the child's home, and formal, regulated care which can be a family child care or child care center (Browne Miller, 1990; Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990). This literature review will focus on formal, regulated child care settings. Currently, there is no national standard for the regulation of child care; monitoring and regulations are determined and administered on a state-by-state basis (Capizanno, Adams, & Sonnenstein, 2000). In California, the State Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing division regulates licensed childcare (State of California, 2004b). A licensed family child

care is defined as “(child) care offered in the home of the provider” (CCCRRN, 2007, p. 20). Family child care can be categorized as either small or large (State of California, 2004b). Licensed family child care accounts for 35% of the child care available to families in California (CCCRRN, 2007). Licensed child care centers go by a variety of names including day care, nursery school, and pre-school (CCCRRN, 2007). Child care centers fall into four categories, three distinct and one blended, based on funding in California: Title 22 programs, Title 5 programs, Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) programs, and mixed funding programs which may contain two or more of these funding sources (CCCRRN, 2007; State of California, 2004a; State of California, 2004b). Title 22 programs can be private for-profit or private non-profit. They are licensed and regulated by Community Care Licensing and must adhere to all laws and regulations put forth by that regulatory branch of the state government, which include teacher education requirements, adult to child ratios, definitions of infant and pre-school aged children, and health and safety regulations (State of California, 2004b). Title 22 programs are funded through a variety of avenues, which can include parent fees/tuition, local government or organizational subsidies, fundraising, and reimbursement from local resource and referral agencies (State of California, 2004b).

Title 5 programs are considered state-funded programs because they receive some sort of grant money from the California Department of Education (State of California, 2004a). In addition to state child care grants Title 5 programs can also be funded through various other sources. They must meet all of the Title 22

requirements (State of California, 2004b), as well as additional regulations put forth from the California Department of Education which include increased teacher education and experience requirements; specific adult to child ratios; an expanded definition of infant, toddler, and pre-school-aged children; and a mandated comprehensive child, family, and program assessment (State of California, 2004a). Early Head Start/Head Start Programs are federally funded programs that must adhere to Title 22 requirements, as well as a nationally established set of criteria for teacher education and experience requirements; adult to child ratios; curriculum requirements; and a mandated comprehensive child, family, and program assessment (US Dept. Health & Human Services, 2008). Both Title 5 and EHS/HS centers have income ceilings for the families they serve (State of California, 2004a; US Dept. Health & Human Services, 2008). Although the mixed system of child care offers a diverse range of settings to meet the changing needs of American families (Browne Miller, 1990), parents are limited by accessibility, affordability, and the quality of child care (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990). The United States is one of the few developed countries without a public support system for working parents with pre-school age children (Browne Miller, 1990). Nationally, more than 90% of children under the age of 5 with employed mothers are in non-parental care at some point during the day (Capizzano, Adams & Sonenstein, 2000). In California, the licensed child care available for children ages 0 to 13 only meets 27% of parent need (CCCRRN, 2007). Licensed child care is even harder to find for families with children under the age of two, where only 5% of the current parent need is met

(CCCRRN, 2007). Employed mothers with children living below the poverty level spend approximately 29% of their monthly income on child care expenses, compared to only 6% of women living above poverty (US Census Bureau, 2008). The cost of full-time care in an infant child care center was as much as \$14,591 in 2007 (NACCRRRA, 2008). Parents are economically driven to work and often have to leave their children wherever they can, regardless of quality (Browne Miller, 1990).

*Aspects of quality.*

Initial concern over the effects of child care on children emerged through mother-child attachment issues (Belsky & Rovine, 1988). Over 50 years of research on the effects of child care have not yet provided a definitive answer as to whether child care is harmful to children, but instead has provided a wealth of research that has aided in better identification of integral aspects of high quality child care (Shpancer, 2006). High quality child care can be defined as care that is developmentally enriching and protective of physical health and safety (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990), child care “that supports optimal learning and development” (Marshall, 2004, p. 166). High quality child care programs have been found to have positive effects on both cognitive (Burchinal et al., 1996; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997) and social outcomes (Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997; Phillips, McCartney & Scarr, 1987; Vandell, Henderson & Wilson, 1988). However, early studies measuring quality found that programs in major cities across the United States had barely adequate care for young children (Deater-Deckard,

Pinkerton & Scarr, 1996; Howes & Smith, 1995; Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1990). Both the industry and parents have a wide variety of criteria that explain the meaning of quality, and as such high quality child care must be defined in terms that are inclusive of both perspectives (Browne Miller, 1990). Quality in early childhood education programs can be measured by both structural and process variables (Marshall, 2004). Although there are many assessments that look at aspects of program quality, the most commonly used measure, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales-Revised, uses multi-dimensional measures to examine both structural and process quality (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998). Structural variables consist of criteria such as teacher/child ratios; group size; and the training, education, and experience of program staff (Honig, 2002; Marshall, 2004). Programs adhering to recommended teacher/child ratio and group size are associated with positive teacher interactions with children (Howes, Phillips & Whitebook, 1992; Howes, Smith & Galinsky, 1995; NICHD, 1996). For the youngest children, group size, environment, teachers, and continuity have the most profound impact (Lally, Torres & Phelps, 1993). Process variables are aspects of program quality that examine the interactions and relationships in a program (Honig, 2002). Process variables are things such as “warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness of (teachers); the emotional tone of the setting, the activities available to children; the developmental appropriateness of the activities; and the learning opportunities available to children” (Marshall, 2004, p. 167). Process variables have been found to be related to better behavioral outcomes for children through kindergarten (Peisner-

Feinberg et al., 2001) and social skills in peer interactions (NICHD, 2001). Structural features of high quality child care are often subject to state and local regulations and can be more readily measured than process quality features; however, process quality gives much more information about the actual quality of care that children receive (Marshall, 2004). Variations in training, education, and experience have been identified as predictors in process quality with young children (Arnett, 1989; Doherty et al., 2006; Howes, 1997; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996; Saracho & Spodek, 2007). Despite evidence that training, education, and experience are related to process quality and positive child outcomes, there is difficulty in the determination and definition of training, education, and experience in early childhood education, severely limiting the ability to clearly determine which of these teacher attributes has the greatest effect on program quality (Maxwell, Feild, & Clifford, 2005).

*Early childhood education teachers.*

Teachers' levels of training, education, and experience are positively linked to teacher behaviors in the classroom (Berk, 1985), social interaction and conversation with children (Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1990), and provider sensitivity and responsive involvement with children (Kontos et al., 1995). Teacher education, regardless of how it is defined, results in gains in basic academic skills for children through kindergarten (Early et al., 2006). Child development and early childhood education training that is specific to the population of children being served had the most profound impact on teacher behaviors (Honig & Hirallal, 1998).

One issue that emerges when examining aspects of teacher training is that often teachers' training, education, and/or experience are continuous variables, that is they cannot necessarily be separated (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). Regardless of the combination of teacher training aspects, teachers with a secondary education were found to provide more positive interactions, more intentionality in interaction, and more developmentally appropriate practice (Arnett, 1989; Howes, 1997; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996, NICHD/ECCRN, 1996). These are key factors of quality in early childhood education programs (Howes, Phillips & Whitebook, 1992; NICHD/ECCRN, 1996). With anticipated arrival of early learning standards in California and in conjunction with the Preschool for All initiative, more attention has been paid to the education and qualifications of the early childhood education workforce not only because of demonstrated outcomes but also as a function of professionalism for early childhood educators (Bellm, 2005). Teacher competencies, although not universally adopted, are increasingly being used to determine and measure professionalism in the early childhood workforce (Bellm, 2005). The adoption of universal competencies would assist the field of early childhood education to better determine goals for children, clarify job categories, and create career stages that would allow educators to explore more diverse career paths (CSCCE, 2008). Although competencies are becoming clearer and more defined, the teacher preparation programs and the content of those programs are under much debate (Lubeck, 1996; Stott & Bowman, 1996; Whitebook et al., 2005). Many teacher educators are questioning the knowledge base of current early childhood

education and child development training programs, citing the need to reconsider and analyze the changing base of child development knowledge to incorporate new theory-to-practice issues, reflection, and the overall process of teacher education (Lubeck, 1996; Stott & Bowman, 1996; Vander Ven, 2000). The current systems in California are inadequate to meet the needs of the workforce (Whitebook et al., 2005). Upper division and graduate level courses are very limited, faculty in the available programs have varying levels of education and actual experience directly related to children ages 0-4, and programs of study do not require practicum experience for students (Whitebook et al., 2005). Additionally, there are severe language barriers for non-traditional students and the clientele they serve and very little support, financially or otherwise, to serve all the students interested in the field (Whitebook et al., 2005). Despite variations in teacher profiles (Whitebook et al., 2005), early childhood educators continue to pursue the training, education, and experience necessary to better serve the children and families in their programs (Dunn & Tabor, 2000). One theory of teacher development proposes four stages, each with its own unique set of tasks and training needs (Katz, 1972). Stage 1 (Survival) is characterized by the need for reassurance and support from more experienced staff and can include specific instruction in skills needed in the classroom (Katz, 1972). Stage 2 (Consolidation) is characterized by maturity in classroom management skills and the ability to focus attention on individual children's needs and can be supported through specific training and collaboration with other skilled professionals (Katz, 1972). The third stage (Renewal) finds

teachers ready to take on new experiences within the professional realm, such as membership and leadership in professional organizations and can be supported by widening the scope of their sources of information (Katz, 1972). Although a general timeline is given as an example, as in any developmental timeline, it acts as a guide, and individual teachers will progress at their own speed. In the last and final stage of teacher development (Maturity), teachers have evolved into more reflective practice and are able to examine their teaching more closely and begin to ask philosophical questions that place more meaning on the context of their work with children and families (Katz, 1972). It is this stage of teacher development that is of the most interest with regards to understanding professional development and the field of early childhood education emerging as a new profession. With this model as a framework, it is important to look at the current workforce in the field of early childhood education to better understand the needs of professional development and the move toward professionalism.

The current early childhood education workforce is a unique, dynamic, and often changing entity in the realm of education (Whitebook et al., 2001).

Documented relationships between wages (NCEDL, 2000), staff turn-over (Whitebook, Phillips & Howe, 1993) and quality (NCEDL, 2000) are all issues connected with the early childhood workforce. Despite these on-going issues, the field of early childhood education continues to draw of workers (Whitebook et al., 2001). Analysis of the early care and education workforce in California reveals several trends (Whitebook et al., 2006). The educational attainment of both family

child care and center-based educators is relatively low compared to that of K-12 educators, the early childhood education workforce is more diverse than K-12 educators but not nearly as diverse ethnically or linguistically as the populations they serve, and there continues to be stability and staffing issues that again have been attributed to the gap in wages between early childhood educators and K-12 educators (Whitebook et al., 2006). With the two very important predictors of child care quality being education and wages (Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Scarr, Eisenberg, & Deater-Deckard, 1994; Whitebook, Phillips & Howe, 1998), it will be imperative that the childcare workforce adjust to increasing training and education and requirements (CSCCE, 2008). In order for California to meet the needs of the families served, a pay scale that rewards higher levels of education needs to be created (Whitebook, Kipnis & Bellm, 2007). Currently there is no pay equity between the wages of preschool and K-12 teachers (Bellm & Whitebook, 2004). Wages in the field of early childhood education are notoriously low and are one of the main reasons why there is such a large amount of turnover among staff in all programs (Whitebook et al., 2001). Wages can be thought of as one indicator of professionalism and as a reflection of both the external and internal beliefs and perceptions about child care and the field of early childhood education.

### *Professionalism in Early Childhood Education*

The dialogue around professionalism within the field of early childhood education has increased as concerns about the quality of early care and education (Caulfield, 1997) and professional accountability have increased (Rodd, 1997).

Early childhood educators have and will continue to address the issue of professionalism within the field as it continues to grow and change in the current educational climate (Watkins & Durant, 1987). There appear to be three themes that emerge as issues related to professionalism with early childhood educators: definition of a profession, active participation in issues concerning the field, and perception of value and contribution to society.

There is a claim that early childhood education is becoming or should become a profession (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). There is much debate as to the definition of professional as it is applied to the field of education, let alone that of early childhood educators (Caulfield, 1997; Spodek, 1995). The term professional can be used in many ways. A professional can be someone who is employed in a professional versus a non-vocational way, one who has a high degree of competence or skill, or a member of one of the learned professions, which have traditionally included law, medicine, and the clergy (Spodek, 1995). Due in part to the dramatic growth in size and scope of the field of early childhood education in recent years, the field is not yet defined itself clearly in terms of professional identity (Mitchell, 2007). It is the responsibility of the field to define how it is different and unique from all other professions (NAEYC, 1993). One suggestion is that early childhood education can be thought of as a semi-profession (Spodek, 1995) or as a craft (Eisikovits & Beker, 2001) because it does not meet all the criteria of a profession: essential service, social need, body of knowledge and skills not possessed by others, involvement in decision making, theory-based, professional association, agreed upon

standards and code of ethics, lengthy period of preparation, high level of public trust, commitment to competence, community sanction, and autonomy (Howsam et al., 1976). A semi-profession differs from a true profession in that they have lower professional status, a shorter training period, a lower level of social acceptance, a less developed body of knowledge and skills, and less autonomy (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). These are all true of early childhood education.

In the past, child development has been considered the sole knowledge base for early care and education (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). In addition to a core body of knowledge, early childhood education encompasses many aspects of meaningful instruction as well as health and safety, relationships with family, and utilization of community resources (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Some common elements that define the field of early childhood education include knowing child development research; observing and assessing children's behavior; providing safe and healthy environments; planning and implementation developmentally appropriate curricula; guiding and utilizing group management skills; fostering relationships with families; supporting family, culture, and society; and a commitment to professionalism (NAEYC, 1993). These aspects of the field combine to create a general body of knowledge and skills set that can be interpreted as meeting the requirements of a profession. However, for many reasons related to the history and status of the field, early childhood education has not required prolonged training of individuals (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). "Early care and education's unique approach set it apart from professions requiring extensive training for entry into the field" (Freeman &

Feeney, 2006, p. 12). New educators with little educational experience in entry-level positions are often paired with expert teachers in the classroom (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Associate degrees are often a first step into the field and toward professionalism (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Early childhood education has the challenging job of ensuring adequate education and training for educators while not limiting the path toward professionalism by setting the criteria so high it is unachievable or discourages those wishing to enter the field (Freeman & Feeney, 2006).

Although there is push to ensure teachers are qualified, teacher certification is perceived as a weak procedure for identification of professionals (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). Significant changes in teacher preparation programs are needed to ensure the consistency of the knowledge and skills acquired by novice educators (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). In general, there are three approaches used to identify the attributes of good teachers: personal characteristics, behaviors, and knowledge and cognitive process (Spodek & Saracho, 1998). These are problematic with regards to teacher preparation, however because personality qualities are often hard to change through education and are lacking in practical application, behaviors are subjective, and there are many and varied decision making roles that early childhood educators play in the classroom (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). It would be more useful for teacher preparation programs to focus on what teachers actually do in practice and why they do it (Saracho & Spodek, 1993).

Fine-tuning the overall knowledge base of early childhood educators as it specifically relates to the profession could actually help raise the level of professionalism (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). NAEYC's revised accreditation process also reflects the move toward professionalism with higher educational requirements (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Staffing qualifications are most often determined by child care licensing agencies housed within state departments of human services (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Child care regulations that allow untrained workers to care for children and the inability of the public to distinguish between a babysitter and a trained early childhood educator contribute to the misunderstanding of the indispensable nature of the profession (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Moving programs toward higher educational and training requirements will require special attention to avoid widening the gap that exists in perception between educational and custodial programs (Cunningham, 2005).

In the past, early childhood educators did not have clearly established standards for practice (Saracho & Spodek, 1993); however, this has since changed. A code of ethics is considered a hallmark of a profession (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct offers a framework for early childhood educators for decision-making (NAEYC, 2005). The Code's intention is to be coupled with the professional judgment of early childhood educators (NAEYC, 2005). NAEYC has also developed a framework for professional development from within the field (NAEYC, 1993). Professionalism comes into play as educators use their judgment in applying specialized knowledge to situations they encounter

(Freeman & Feeney, 2006). NAEYC defines six professional categories for early childhood educators, each with increasing requirements for education, experience, and level of responsibility within a program (NAEYC, 1993). Early childhood educators are also devoted to meeting the needs of the families they serve and therefore meet the criteria for altruism in the move toward professionalism (Freeman & Feeney, 2006).

A second theme that is related to professionalism within the field is the arenas in which early childhood educators actively participate. There is a push for early childhood educators to be more proactive in the political, professional, and academic realms that are related to the field (Rodd, 1997). Although economic considerations are a major and the most influential component of professionalization among early childhood educators (Grupper, 2003), in this day of accountability, it appears that government and early childhood education may be moving in the same direction on some issues, particularly that of professional development and professionalism (Cunningham, 2005). Early childhood educators have been making do with what is given to them rather actively pursuing the resources needed to assure high quality in programs (DeBord & Boling, 2002). Professionalization increases the costs of services because those with a sense of professional identity tend to demand better working conditions and higher standards for themselves and the families they serve (Grupper, 2003). In early childhood education, this equates to better wages and benefits and lower teacher/child ratios (Grupper, 2003). Active participation in decision-making will help shape the future of the field (Mitchell,

2007). Early childhood education can move toward greater autonomy by participating in and encouraging governing agencies to include experts in early childhood education when developing and implementing regulations and policies (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). A clearly defined relationship to the larger community would assist the field of early childhood education to better determine the type of role it wants to play in society (Saracho, & Spodek, 1993). Early childhood educators need to unite and collaborate to identify what best practice means (Rodd, 1997). Efforts within the field to educate policy makers as well as the general public will increase understanding of the unique nature and contribution of the field to society (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). It is suggested that early childhood educators understand and participate in the field at the grass roots level implanting quality practices in the classroom, as well as at the political and policy level influencing and acting as agents of change (Rodd, 1997). NAEYC's activity supports professionalism in the field through facilitating the professional development of individuals and improving public understanding and support for quality programs (NAEYC, 1993). Prioritization and community involvement in these issues are paramount in order to see any significant improvement (Grupper, 2003). Barriers to the professionalization of the field of early childhood education are both external and internal (Spodek, 1995). One identifiable external barrier exists in the form of the private sector of the field which often pays lower wages to workers (Spodek, 1995). Another challenge of the field is to maintain or increase professionalism and quality care, without increasing the cost (Grupper, 2003). Internal barriers exist in the forms

of the actual knowledge base of early childhood education and in the role of gender in the field (Spodek, 1995). Additional barriers to professionalism for early childhood educators exist in the form of a lack of money, scheduling issues, limited availability or accessibility to programs of study, institutional racism, and language and literacy problems (NAEYC, 1993). Some suggest advocacy toward a tiered reimbursement system that rewards programs and educators based on quality measurement scales and educational attainment (Cunningham, 2005). In order to continue the move toward professionalism, early childhood educators should understand and accept the responsibility to become politically aware, to act as advocates for themselves and others, and to facilitate change within the field and society (Rodd, 1997).

Finally, both the definition of professionalism and the active participation of educators appear to be related to perceptions about their own self-worth and value as a profession (Rodd, 1997; Spodek, 1995; Watkins & Durant, 1987). The field has roots in both social reform and education, and although these two traditions often overlap, there is a distinct difference in public perception (NAEYC, 1993). NAEYC defines early childhood education as “any part- or full day group program in a center, school or home that serves children from birth through age eight” (NAEYC, 1993, pg. 2). This definition is somewhat problematic in that child care is assumed to mean providing custodial care to children when their families are unavailable (NAEYC, 1993). Early childhood education has traditionally implied a more academic focus, promoting children’s

social and educational development (NAEYC, 1993). Lack of resources is often a barrier to professionalism, but a lack of vision based on low resources can serve as a bigger barrier (DeBord & Boling, 2002). Empowerment among educators in the field of early childhood education is necessary in order to continue taking an active role in moving toward professionalism, rather than allowing others outside the field to address issues on their behalf (Rodd, 1997). In the field itself, there is a tradition of selflessness, which makes demands for an increase in status problematic (Spodek, 1995). Early childhood education is seen as women's work because of the care required by children in their early years (Spodek, 1995). Our society has a deeply held belief that women have a natural tendency to be mothers, and therefore, they have a natural tendency to teach young children (Spodek, 1995). Only recently have women in the field of early childhood education become concerned with worthy wages (Spodek, 1995). There are differences between mothering and teaching (Katz, 1980); however, these differences need to be made more clear and accessible to early childhood educators and the general public. The inability to identify differences creates tension between early childhood educators and the families they serve (Katz, 1980). At a time when the importance of early childhood experiences are more clearly understood than ever, early childhood educators are not perceived as skilled specialists but as surrogate parents (Watkins & Durant, 1987). Early childhood education requires more than a love of children (Saracho & Spodek, 1993) and a "broad lap and sweet smile" (Cunningham, 2005, p. 24).

“Professionalism is not an end in itself – a state of being – but an ongoing effort – a process of becoming” (Caulfield, 1997, p. 263). Early childhood educators have a great potential to become professionals, yet many have not yet attained that goal (Freeman & Feeney, 2006). Attitudes of the public cannot be changed without increased comprehension of the value of early childhood educators (Watkins & Durant, 1987). Of concern within the field of early childhood education is self-perception of early childcare educators (Watkins & Durant, 1987). A strong case can be made that the self-perception of early childhood educators may be linked to the relationship that early care settings have with both education and social reform. An even stronger case can be made that early childhood educators self-perception may be more closely linked to societal perceptions of the importance of the work done with young children.

Considerable documentation exists regarding teacher beliefs’ within the classroom (Cassidy et al., 1995; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2008, Stipek & Byler, 1997); however, very little information is available about early childhood educators’ beliefs about the field of early childhood education or of professionalism.

### *Summary*

Understanding the constructs of professionalism within the field of early childhood education is paramount to understanding the evolution of the profession. An historical overview of the practices and beliefs around children and families demonstrate strong relationships with both the social and economic

factors of American society (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). These factors remain present in contemporary society and continue to shape the field of early childhood education. Changes in work and labor patterns, family structure, and the diverse and ever-changing populations within the United States have altered the way that society raises children (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). The use of childcare is an important component in the lives of many families, and as such, early childhood education has been closely examined in order to determine its effects on young children (Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1990). Of particular interest are the effects of quality child care on all aspects of a child's development (Marshall, 2004). There are both concrete and abstract indicators for high quality childcare (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1990). Teacher preparation, which includes training, education, and experience, is an abstract or process quality indicator (Marshall, 2004). There is a great deal of variation in early childhood education when it comes to teacher preparation (Whitebook et al., 2005). Despite a wide variety of beliefs and practices that occur with teacher preparation, a consistent theme is that of ongoing professional development and professionalism (Caulfield, 1997). It can be said that there is a strong belief within the field that professional development is the main path to achieve a state of professionalism; however, there are many ways to define professionalism and many barriers to professionalism in the field of early childhood education (Spodek, 1995). These barriers include the definition of a profession, active participation in advocacy and policy-making, and the self-perception of early childhood educators. Self-

perception is an interesting barrier in that there are both external and internal issues that relate directly to the issues of professionalism, such as wages, perception of the field, and contributions to society (Spodek, 1995).

The following chapter will explore the methodology I used in order to answer the question: what are the self-perceptions of professionalism of early childhood educators in a small Northern California county?

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will describe the methodology used in order to examine self-perceptions of professionalism among teachers in the field of early childhood education. It will include a brief description of the context and setting of the research, a description of the participants and the ways in which the research was conducted, a description of the analysis of the research, and a conclusion.

#### *Setting*

This research evolved from my observation of the varying degrees of training, education, experience, and ethics experienced in over twenty years in the field of early childhood education. Although the State of California is in the process of creating competencies for early childhood educators (CSCCE, 2008), it is difficult to articulate the skills, abilities, and knowledge necessary to be a good teacher with young children. With the ever-increasing research about brain development and the changing knowledge base of child development (Lubeck, 1996; Stott & Bowman, 1996), it is even more challenging to think about ways to help teachers incorporate new information and expand their current practices in the move toward being a good teacher (Whitebook et al., 2005). Partner these challenges with low pay, high turnover, and the overall low status of teachers who work with young children (Whitebook et al., 2006), and it is surprising that the field of early childhood

education even exists. However, it does exist, and the field is quickly moving into and exploring the realm of professionalism (NAEYC, 2006). It was with this in mind that my research explored the self-perceptions of professionalism of early childhood educators in a small Northern California county.

Humboldt County is located in the Northern Coastal region of California (Brown & Wohl, 2004). The formal child care industry in Humboldt County serves dual purposes: to enable parents to maintain employment and/or obtain education and training and to provide age appropriate child development learning opportunities (Brown & Wohl, 2004). The on-going changes in economy and demographics of the county create a challenge for its child care industry (Brown & Wohl, 2004). Moderate population growth inhibits economic development; however, the child care industry has been identified as one of the economic infrastructures needed to attract and retain young working families and to maintain a certain quality of life (Brown & Wohl, 2004). Within the county, only 26% of families needing child care are being served by licensed child care programs (CCCRRN, 2007). There is a recognized shortage of child care in rural and outlying areas of the county (Brown & Wohl, 2004). Accessibility and affordability are critical barriers to families seeking quality child care (Brown & Wohl, 2004). The county's child care industry faces challenges in the form of shortages of integrated economic development opportunities, barriers to increased quality and accessibility, and insufficient investment by other industry and government (Brown & Wohl, 2004). Locally, there are several efforts to improve the educational attainment, wages, benefits, and retention rate of the child

care workforce (Brown & Wohl, 2004). The local First 5 program, the Local Child Care Planning Council, California's Early Childhood Mentor Program, and the Child Development Training Consortium all have programs in which early childhood educators can receive on-going professional development support either in the form of training, incentives, or general recognition and support of the work of early childhood educators (Brown & Wohl, 2004). Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of the child care industry to the economic health of the county, there continues to be a lack of investment into the industry by those that would benefit from its growth (Brown & Wohl, 2004).

### *Participants*

The research was conducted during the second half of the 2007-2008 school year. The participants were contacted via a mailed questionnaire (See Appendix A for the content of the questionnaire) and interview response card based on their involvement or affiliation with the local First 5 Child Care Subcommittee. Seventy-four participants returned questionnaires. Of those 74 responses, 38 returned an interview response card. The interview cards were separated into two categories: participants in the Professional Track of the First 5 Retention Incentive Program and other. Of the other category, four were selected at random for interviews. An additional four response cards were selected, two from family child care and two from child care centers.

Of the 74 participants who completed the questionnaire, 100% were female. The median age of participants was 46.5 years of age. The median income range for

participants was \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year. The average number of years participants have worked in an early childhood education setting is 14.8 years. All participants have had some college courses. Twenty-nine percent of participants have an Associate's degree, 43% have a Bachelor's degree, and 7% have a Master's degree. Although there is some overlap among age groups served in various programs, 67% of all participants serve 3-year olds. Only 12% serve children less than 11 months of age.

### *Methodology*

I contacted interview participants via e-mail and phone to set up interviews. I secured written permission and audio-taped and later transcribed the interviews. The structured interviews included a description of the study and ten questions (See Appendix B for the content of the study description and the questions). The ten questions focused on aspects of work in the field of early childhood education, which dealt with the skills, knowledge, qualities, and characteristics of teachers.

I contacted focus group participants via e-mail and phone to coordinate a meeting date. I secured written permission and audio-taped and later transcribed the focus group interview. The structured focus group included a description of the study and eight questions. (See Appendix C for the content of the study description and the questions). Although there were eight questions, only six of the questions were actually asked during the focus group because the participants addressed the other two questions without being asked directly, and it seemed redundant to ask the questions. The six questions asked directly to participants focus on aspects of the

early childhood education field that look at career ladders, professional development, and professionalism.

*Assessment.*

For the questionnaire sections that provided demographic information, I tallied the responses and used the appropriate demographic statistic to highlight the findings of the questions. In all cases, where applicable, responses were converted into percentages. For the questionnaire questions that had self-reported responses, I tallied responses and collapsed them into themes consistent with participant responses. Where participants were asked to rank criteria, I tallied only the responses marked 1 in order to determine the most important aspects ranked by participants. Questionnaire responses were organized into three themes: demographics of the participants, aspects of professionalism among participants, and professional development activities among participants.

For the interviews, I transcribed and coded all interviews using themes consistent with the findings of the literature review: defining the profession, action and advocacy, and the self-perception of early childhood educators. These overarching themes were then sub-coded for further analysis.

For the focus group, I transcribed and coded all responses using themes again consistent with the findings of the literature review: defining the profession, action and advocacy, and the self-perception of early childhood educators. These overarching themes were again sub-coded for further analysis.

*Conclusion*

A total of 74 questionnaires were returned. I conducted five individual interviews and one focus group with five participants. Analysis of the data reveals several themes consistent with the literature that may be of interest to the local early childhood education workforce. The following chapter will present the results obtained from the content analysis of themes.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I present the results obtained from the content analysis of the themes that participants provided in their responses. I present these results in three sections. The first section presents the results of the questionnaire using descriptive statistics and participant responses. The second section includes the thematic results of the interviews using the participants' responses for illustrative purposes. The third section includes the thematic results of the focus group participants' responses.

#### *Questionnaires*

The questionnaire in this study used a combination of open- and closed-ended questions and included 3 questions in which participants were asked to rank the importance of aspects of professionalism in early childhood education. One hundred percent of the participants were female. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 69 years of age with the average being 44 years of age. Fourteen percent of participants work in a licensed family child care, 24% identified themselves as working in a Title 22 child care center, 12% identified themselves as working in a Title 5 child care center, and 24% were identified as working in a program that fell outside of the first three categories or were unable to clearly identify their work setting. Self-reported yearly incomes ranged from less than \$10,000 per year to over \$50,000, with the median income range being \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year. The number of years that participants have worked in the field of early childhood education ranged from one

year to 38 years, with the mode being 11 years. Seventeen percent of participants have taken some college courses, 29% have an Associate's degree, 43% have a Bachelor's degree, and 6% hold a Master's degree. Over 78% of participants work with 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children, and 16% work with children fewer than 11 months in age.

Examining aspects of professional development, the questionnaire measured the frequency that early childhood educators participated in professional development activities. When asked about in-service training participation provided at their place of employment, 49% reported participating more than 3 times per year, 27 % once or twice a year, 9% less than once a year, 9% never participate, and 6% did not respond. For workshops outside of their place of employment, participants reported that 39% participated more than three times per year, 43% participated once or twice per year, 14% participated less than once per year, and 4% never participate. In regard to participation in college courses related to early childhood education, 5% indicated that they participate more than 3 times per year, 28% participate once or twice a year, 49% participate fewer than once a year, and 16% never participate. When asked about participation in college courses not related to early childhood education, participants responded that 20% participate once or twice a year, 38% participate less than once a year, and 42% never participate. A question inquiring about participation in other professional development activities revealed that 32% participate more than 3 times per year, 35% participate once or twice a year, 22% participate less than once a year, and 11% never participate.

The questionnaire also inquired about aspects of professionalism in the field. There were approximately 57 different self-reported job titles ranging from “playgroup facilitator” to “Executive Director.” These job titles were collapsed into four main categories: family child care provider/owner, Child Development Permit Matrix Aide through Master Teacher levels, Child Development Permit Matrix Site Supervisor and Program Director levels, and other category which includes job titles that fall outside of the first three categories. There were approximately 100 different self-reported job responsibilities ranging from “cooking” to “website management.” These self-reported responses were collapsed into five main categories: housekeeping/custodial care, work with children, work with families, work with staff, general administration, and other category which includes job responsibilities that fall outside of the first four categories. Seventy-seven percent of participants felt that their wages were not appropriate for their level of responsibility. There were approximately 52 different self-reported responses when participants were asked who they share skills or information with outside of their workplace. These responses were collapsed into four main categories: parents, community members, government, and others category which includes responses that did not fall within the first three categories. There were approximately 26 separate self-reported responses when participants were asked why they participate in professional development activities. These responses were collapsed into four categories: on-going education, personal fulfillment, employability, and job requirement. When asked if there was a person or group who especially encouraged professional development as an early

childhood educator, 69% responded yes, 24% responded no, and 7% did not respond. There were 37 individual self-reported responses when participants stating yes were asked to identify a person or group. These responses were collapsed into four main categories: individuals, groups, groups affiliated with ECE, and other. When asked to identify membership in professional organizations, there was a wide range of responses with the majority of participants claiming membership in NAEYC and the local affiliate HAEYC. Participants were also asked to identify any professional journals they read on a regular basis. Fifty percent of participants stated that they do not subscribe to any professional journals. For the other 50% that do subscribe to a professional journal, the two most popular journals were *Young Children* and the *Child Care Information Exchange*. There were approximately 20 separate self-reported reasons why they read these journals. These responses were collapsed into four main categories: currency in the field, on-going education, personal fulfillment, and other.

When asked what types of people participants consider professionals in the field, there was a very wide range of responses which included “everyone” to “college ECE educators.” Participants responded to a question about barriers to pursuing professional development, and 70% stated that they have experienced barriers. These barriers ranged from “anxiety” to “time” and were then collapsed into three categories: personal barriers, professional barriers, and other. Participants were asked to consider whether their work in early childhood education is short-term

or long-term. Seventy-eight percent consider their work long-term, 13% consider their work short-term, and 9% fell in the other category.

The questionnaire also contained three questions that asked the participants to rank various aspects of professionalism in the field of early childhood education. One question explored the skills and abilities of early childhood educators. Forty-five percent of participants ranked “the ability to establish and maintain a safe and healthy environment for children” as the most important skill/ability, 20% percent ranked “knowledge of child development” as the most important, and 9% ranked the “ability to build and foster relationships with families” as the most important. A second question explored aspects of early childhood professional preparation. Thirty-five percent ranked “promoting child development and learning” as the most important aspect of professional preparation, 26% ranked “teaching and learning,” and 20% chose “building family and community relations.” The third question explored aspects of professionalism within the field of early childhood. Twenty-eight percent of participants ranked “use of ethical and professional standards” as the most important aspect of professionalism, 16% ranked “identification with the early childhood profession,” and 15% equally ranked “self-motivated, on-going learning” and “advocacy for children, families, and the profession.”

### *Interviews*

The interviews were transcribed and coded using three overarching themes identified in the literature: defining the profession, action and advocacy in the profession, and the self-perceptions of early childhood educators.

*Defining the profession.*

With the theme of defining the profession, the responses were coded using 12 characteristics of professionalism (Howsam et al., 1976). These 12 characteristics were collapsed into three main areas: functional aspects of a profession, community support of a profession, and policy of a profession. Within the category functional aspects of a profession, responses were further coded into 4 categories: knowledge and skills, standards and ethics, length of preparation, and commitment to competence. Participants' responses revealed two aspects to the knowledge and skills category, which include concrete and abstract skill sets. Within the context of the concrete skill are skills or concepts that can be taught to some degree either through practice and reinforcement or in settings designed to increase the knowledge base of early childhood educators. This concrete skill set includes knowledge and skills that range from punctuality to understanding child development within the cultural context of family and society. The following response is an example that illustrates this concrete skill sets:

You know knowledge would be understanding, you know, how people grow and develop as children and also – and I think you have to have some knowledge of – like cultural differences and -- you know, not just like racially culture but family cultures and just, you know, knowledge of that...

The second set of skills is identified as abstract skills that are more difficult to teach and involve belief systems that are challenging to identify. Abstract knowledge and

skills ranged from patience to a love and appreciation of the profession. The following response is an example that illustrates this abstract skill set:

It is just who you are so you have to have a level of patience and self control to be able to do your job and certainly I can say that those things can't be taught.

Participants' responses highlighted components of standards and ethics within the field. Responses ranged from identification of the repetition of the job to maintaining integrity in the work performed with children and families. The following example highlights this sub-category:

I think that you have to be able to – I am not sure how to describe it, but almost separate yourself from your work because you may have personal attitudes or opinions about families lifestyles or what values to instill in kids and because we work with such a broad range of families you have to be able to separate yourself a little bit from that.

Within the sub-category length of preparation participants' responses yielded two themes: planning a career within the field and career ladder within the field. For career planning, responses ranged from personal experiences with early childhood education programs to actively searching for career options. The following example highlights this sub-category:

Actually, I have to say my children were in Head Start and that's what got me into this. It also worked a little bit, it worked into my schedule, my children,

I waited I was fortunate until my daughter started kindergarten then I started working.

In describing a career ladder within the field of early childhood education, there were two sub-categories that emerged: general career ladder and long-term career choices. For the general career ladder category, participant responses ranged from identification of entry-level positions to use of the Child Development Permit Matrix. The following example highlights this sub-category:

Which actually when I – when I started – my first job I started out as a teacher and I just kind of got thrown into it because I was actually supposed to have someone helping me learn what to do, but since I had six units already and I was taking a class I was considered a fully qualified teacher by the state and you know, I got thrown into this job where it was me and an assistant and then 24 kids and it was, you know, pretty chaotic and it was kind of like sink or swim. You know, which wasn't ideal. I felt that I had learned a lot, you know, from that experience. You know, in some ways I think maybe the kids kind of suffered as far as, you know, me not having experience that I felt that I probably should have had.

Long-term career planning emerged as a sub-category within length of career preparation. Participant responses ranged from uncertain long-term career plans to teaching in higher education. The following examples highlight this sub-category:

I see myself doing basically the same thing that I am doing now. I have been in here long enough that I have tried different things. I have worked with

different ages of children. I have worked in full daycare versus preschool or half-day preschool -- I have gone out of the classroom to do more supervisor work, hated it, went back to the classroom. The one that I have right now, I think, you couldn't get a more perfect situation except for a little more spending money. I love to spend money. I love that. But without that, it is just a perfect solution for me and I think the way that it is set up that I can continue doing it, you know, even as I get older or more frail, I look forward to it.

Participants' responses revealed components of their understanding of commitment to competence, which included knowledge and skill with resources, integrity, and willingness and dedication. The following response illustrates this understanding:

But I liked how the staff really got in there to help, not necessarily myself, but around me, other parents that were there. They were young and they didn't have anything and the staff was knowledgeable to get them hooked up with the resources without making them feel like they were doing it all for them. And then, you know, I really liked children and the fact that to see how a child may come in and you know clearly something has gone on and that teacher was just able to bring out that light in them. It was a great thing. I really wanted to return some of that, that was shown me and to the people that were around me and so that is what started me.

*Action and advocacy in the profession.*

With the theme of action and advocacy in the profession, the responses were coded into two categories that are descriptive of participants' role within the area of action and advocacy. These two categories are identified as active and passive roles. The active role can be described as the participants' ability to act whether through knowledge or action to advance information or understanding of the field of early childhood education. The following response is illustrative of active action and advocacy:

It's probably helping families become more self-sufficient and finding resources to help them and educating themselves about child development and how kids grow. You know, seeing – seeing people get to a better place with how they interact with their kids.

Another participant also identifies another aspect of active action and advocacy:

I would say helping some of those special need children integrate into the classroom and getting help with that, although they do get help, when help is offered, but sometimes it is not at the second that you need it.

The passive role can be described as the participants' ability to rationalize aspects of the profession in order to make sense of unique aspects of the profession. The following participant response highlights this rationalization or passive role within the profession:

I think we will move more towards the preschool for all. I really do. It just seems to make sense. Why do we have all of the research about how young

kids grow and develop without responding to it? It just seems silly to me that – I think it is going to go there eventually. I have always thought that is the only way the wages are going to come up is when it is government subsidized. And I'll throw in another little bit. Just my own little soap box that First 5 in the beginning or many years ago, started recognizing that something needs to be done about wages and started their incentive programs which I thought that this is a step in the direction of having government funding to help subsidize what we know is important. But then they have switched gears and put so much of their emphasis on training and education to staff – they still call it an incentive but, like I say, an incentive to continue working is really tied to wages. People have to be able to live on one's wages. Getting more education is not necessarily going to be an incentive to people to stay in the field longer. It is going to be what is needed to get to those higher-level positions but once they get there, if the wages are not what they need it to be, that is not going to be an incentive to them. So I just want to put a little plug in there for First 5 and their shift away from a true incentive – and then I think it is important to help people get the education that they need. But they have lost sight of what they are supposed to be doing so that our field has lost ground in that way. I feel like that money that was available to help subsidize some of those wages is not available any longer. People are not willing to in essence take on a second job. That is what they are asking for and the number of hours that they are asking for to

get extra money. We can do that working at McDonald's. I can go down to McDonald's and get an extra job if I want to work 70 extra hours.

*Self-perceptions of early childhood educators.*

Within the theme of self-perceptions of early childhood educators, interview responses were coded using general aspects of cognitive dissonance theory and were separated into two categories: responses consistent with educators' cognition and responses that are inconsistent with educators' cognition. Inconsistent responses accounted for 86% of coded responses. The following participant response demonstrates the inconsistency of cognition within the field of early childhood education:

Well, traditionally, the pay for child – there's kind of two aspects to look at from my perspective. One is childcare and that's traditionally come out of families pockets which they are paying for childcare so that they can work but of course when they are working and earning money they have to pay for the childcare. So that's with the economy you have got kind of conflicting forces there so that makes sense to me that it is not going to be that high paying of a job. I think kind of secondary to that is that traditionally childcare has been babysitting – babysitting by women who we all know just naturally care for children because that is just automatically what we do so why pay a whole lot for it when you are used to working in the kitchen preparing dinner while the kids are off playing, so it is I think traditionally that is part of being a mom and being a woman is taking care of kids so it

shouldn't be all of that high paying of a job. Moms don't get paid at all. I think – I had another one too. From the preschool point of view, because I want to separate daycare, providing care for people who are working and preschool that is supplementing education. And that I think that we just haven't recognized or are slow to respond to the idea that putting our educational resources into young children is going to pay off in the long run.

### *Focus Group*

The focus group responses were transcribed and coded using the three overarching themes identified in the literature: defining the profession, action and advocacy in the profession, and the self-perceptions of early childhood educators.

#### *Defining the profession.*

With the theme of defining the profession, the participant responses were again coded using 12 characteristics of professionalism (Howsam et al., 1976) and collapsed into the three main areas: functional aspects of a profession, community support of a profession, and policy of a profession. Within this response set, no participant response fell within policy of the profession. For responses that were coded as functional aspects of the profession, they were further sub-coded into 3 categories: length of preparation, commitment to competence, and professional organization. Two sub-categories re-emerged within length of preparation: general career ladder and long-term career choices. With regards to general career planning, responses varied from on-the-job training to four years of early childhood education

specific college education and training. The following response is on participants experience with general career planning:

That's where I came from. I got a job as an assistant in somebody's family childcare home as I was on a break from a pre-med program at another college in another county and I just needed a break and I needed to work and I got there doing what she was doing and the reason that she had to hire someone was that she was going to school and couldn't be in her family practice so she hired me and I fell in love with it and we ended up arguing over who was going to get to take classes, so I actually dropped out of where I was going to school, moved back home and started going to school while I worked and I actually completed my schooling while working full time. And I wouldn't trade that for the world. That really did it for me. But maybe because I was older too, I think my age...

Also within the length of preparation, participants identified a lack of structure in planning and executing long-term career choices for early childhood educators. The following response highlights this lack of structure:

So if I had been younger knowing and that I was going to do this from the get go which would have helped I would have started that process a lot sooner. I would have already had my Master's. It's too late for me now. So, my advice to other people is don't wait as long as I did, because there is always going to be cap-off place in there somewhere. I want to teach adults and I have to get a Master's degree and that is a stumbling block. And I can't... Not if I, unless I

don't work. And how am I going to support my family and do the same thing? And there's the basic level of situation... I find another outlet for that, I'm realizing the traditional college teaching level is not what I am going to get into unless they change the requirements. That's not going to happen in my lifetime. So I do have to find where that, you know, where the ceiling is going to be for me.

Responses for commitment to competency ranged from participants actively seeking out information to enhance their experiences to participants actively seeking out different experiences that supported their own personal needs. The following response illustrates the support sought to meet personal needs:

I was subbing in all of those centers, and I ended up in an infant-toddler center almost full time, even more than the full time people because I had units and I had experience. But after six months, I decided that this was enough for me. I didn't want to be a little circus performer with 24 little circus clowns running around doing everything and I really liked the freedom that I had in family childcare and I really like the smaller groups and the more continuity that I had with the families and I jumped out of that center bandwagon and I never went back.

Responses categorized into professional organization ranged from identification of the lack of infrastructure in the field of early childhood education to active participation and encouragement of affiliation with professional organizations.

The following quote identifies one participant's experience with professional organization:

I want to go back to what we were talking about when you get out of college and you start, I started at \$6.00 an hour, for some reason I managed to stay in the field. But I think what kept me was getting involved with HAEYC. It was getting invited by the head teacher at my program. Look you have to join this group I'm with and I went and I was terrified and intimidated because everyone on the board were my professors from HSU. That was when Nancy Frost and everyone was on there and I immediately joined the Worthy Wage Committee and began to be educated about the professional aspects of the field. And it was that outlet that allowed me to have time to talk to adults and to have connections with other people doing what I am doing and to start to see myself as a professional. That has kept me in this field at all time. I don't think I would have stayed if it weren't for that. I didn't really think about making a living when I went to college.

*Action and advocacy in the profession.*

With the theme of action and advocacy in the profession, the responses were again coded into two categories that are descriptive of participants' role within the area of action and advocacy. These two categories are identified as active and passive roles. The active role can be described as the participants' ability to act whether through knowledge or action to advance information or understanding of the

field of early childhood education. The following responses are illustrative of active action and advocacy:

The first Worthy Wage Day in '92 and '93 where we were trying to focus attention on the fact that we didn't have a worthy wage. We still don't have a worthy wage. It's better, but it's still, you know. So that pretty much, you know, I just had to get myself in there politically and start poking somebody.

The passive is described as the participants' ability to rationalize aspects of the profession in order to make sense of unique aspects of the profession. The following participant response highlights this rationalization or passive role within the profession:

Well, and the tricky part is keeping them so interested. You know they're busy, they have small children. But are they going to be interested enough when their children aren't small to come back and re-visit those things that they were passionate about while their children were small? I think that's what we, they drop off. And, I almost dropped out when I had children. So when their kids get to be in elementary school dealing with all of that elementary school stuff and are they going to come back and continue to be our advocates?

*Self-perceptions of early childhood educators.*

Within the theme of self-perceptions of early childhood educators, focus group responses were coded using general aspects of both cognitive dissonance and self-perception theories and were separated into two categories: responses consistent

with educators' cognition and responses that are inconsistent with educators' cognition. Professional development and networking emerged as examples of consistent with educators' cognition. The following participant response is an example of consistency of cognition with respect to the field of early childhood education:

Like you said, it keeps you – it keeps you going. I think also taking classes, even if it is just something, a class – Humboldt Childcare Council – for a while that's all I could fit in. You know, while I was working full-time as a director and trying to get my family childcare figured out and started licensing, and I really needed to take classes. It just gives you that boost, that creative, Oh wow, here's some new activities and here a thing on brain development. They had a really good thing... Just being able to network... They don't have to cost a lot of money. But they don't necessarily go towards anything as well. I think those two things have been really important. And going to the state conference was just like wow. That was the best thing.

Responses that were inconsistent with educators' cognition ranged from wages to the justification of the choice to work in the field of early childhood education. The following participant response demonstrates the inconsistency of cognition with respect to wages within the field of early childhood education:

One of my friends that I graduated from HSU with, she now lives in southern Oregon. She left the field completely and she has no plans to ever go back

and she was a really good preschool teacher....She...to her it's just way too much work and responsibility for the return. She worked as a telemarketer type thing doing phone surveys and she was just happy as a clam because she could leave her work at home. She was paid more probably than she would have been. She was always both impressed and repelled that I am, continue to be involved...There were moments when I was embarrassed to tell my parents what I was making. I have a cousin in New York City who pays her child's part-time preschool – her son is the same age as my son and he goes to a part-time preschool in New York City. They pay as much as I earn. So I'm embarrassed to tell those relatives how much I make.

This same participant also shared an experience that demonstrates the inconsistency in cognition with regards to justification of the importance work done by educators:

I mean, I'm thinking, it took me years to win my grandparents over and I am so glad that before they died they understood my profession because my grandmother must have said 100 times, when are you going to get a real job, you know? My husband was going to law school...When are you going to get a real job? And I started to believe it, you know. So I tell her all the stuff I was doing with CAEYC and going to Sacramento and all that stuff, but I did finally convince her of the importance of my work and that felt really, really good to get somebody who had been so – totally didn't understand it and then got it.

One participant's response identifies another inconsistent cognition with regards to the importance of early childhood education.

I had my nails done and I was telling her that my son in my classroom this year and she said, oh good so you can babysit while you're working.

Another example of inconsistent cognition appears in the context of job experience and long-term career planning. The following is one participant's experience with inconsistent cognition:

I came in second five times, really good jobs where I would have been able to do very well. I'm a totally organized person, completely professional in every manner, but I didn't have anything that was quantifiable on paper that they could see even though the resume was all out— I had a lot of science background, I have a lot of math background, a lot of college education. I have a BA degree already. It didn't mean anything when it came to going into the open field of the regular businesses and I had to go back into my own field and struggle to get back to the top. After I did that, it was like a whole new awakening that I was okay. I really did do okay, and I'm okay here and this is all right. But, I left and I had to go through that whole process to come back. And if I hadn't of been a stronger person I probably wouldn't have come back. I would have found a minimum wage job somewhere else because I have house payments and life.

*Summary*

In this chapter, I presented the results of the content analysis of the themes that are related to professionalism and the self-perception of early childhood educators. These results were illustrated using demographic information, percentage frequencies of thematic content, and illustrative examples of participant responses. The results were coded into three major sections: defining the profession, action and advocacy in the profession, and the self-perceptions of early childhood educators. The same thematic content was used to analyze all three sections. The next chapter offers an analysis of the results.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I will analyze the results illustrated in Chapter Four. The analysis will be presented in five sections, which will follow the themes identified in the results. In the first section, I offer an analysis of the results of the questionnaire. Then I analyze the results of responses categorized under defining the profession. The third section analysis will address responses categorized under action and advocacy in the profession. In section four I analyze the responses coded under self-perceptions of early childhood educators, followed by the fifth and final section analysis of the results of all aspects of my research.

#### *Questionnaire Analysis*

In analyzing the questionnaire responses, the demographic information revealed by participants was consistent with my experience in the field. There is a wide range of diversity among early childhood educators in Humboldt County with regards to age, income, education, experience, and years in the field. Inconsistent with my experience, but identified within responses and interesting to note were the wide variety of program settings listed by participants. Many participants were unsure of their funding sources which points to either a general unawareness or a lack of understanding of the ways in which their particular settings operate. Others listed specific philosophies or clearly defined age groups as a way to separate their

programs from the choices listed. I think it is a way for some educators to set themselves apart from the stigma of custodial child care by offering what may be perceived by both educators and consumers as enrichment to the care and education provided by those program settings. In looking at responses with regards to aspects of the profession the myriad of responses to both job titles as well as job responsibilities highlights the inconsistency within the profession itself about what exactly is the job of early childhood educators. Certainly aspects of custodial care are present, however the spectrum of job responsibilities identified by participants carry over into personal beliefs and attitudes about what is important in the care and education of young children. Also inconsistent with my experience and the literature were the responses of educators who felt their wages were appropriate for their level of responsibility. This may stem from not only personal beliefs about the role of early childhood educators in the lives of young children and families, but also indicates a lesser value placed or low expectations with regards to wages in the field of early childhood education. Responses to aspects of professional development opportunities were consistent with my experience in that early childhood educators more often participate in in-service trainings and workshops rather than college courses, either related to child development or otherwise. This is in part because of the types of program settings in the county that are required to provide in-service training to employees, but also a fear amongst early childhood educators to participate in formal education. Some may be wary of college and others may be deterred by a perceived difficulty of course content. In any case, the longevity of

many participants time in the field was not consistent with on-going formal professional development. Participant responses identified many arenas in which educational information is shared as a professional, outside of their job descriptions, but this was inconsistent with whom participants identified as professionals. Within participant responses there were a wide variety of people who are considered professionals in early childhood education. This included examples such as parents, grandparents, janitors, and writers. Also indicated in these responses were attributes of people who are considered to be professionals in the field such as people who are open to new ideas, people who make a long-term commitment to working with children, and people who are in it for the child and not the money. I think these responses indicate either a gross misunderstanding of the question by a significant number of participants, or a general inability of educators in the field to not only separate their personal experiences from their professional experience as an educators, but an inability to define what exactly is early childhood education. There is a great deal of aspects of parenting that overlap in the field of early childhood education and I think that educators are hesitant to clearly identify the differences because it challenges their own beliefs about the care and education of young children. This discontinuity of beliefs reappears in participants' responses when asked about barriers to professional development. Consistent with my experience participants' stated that there are professional barriers such as finding substitutes or not having college courses regularly available. More prevalent however were personal barriers such as family. I think this barrier also falls within the parent/early

childhood educator conundrum and challenges educators' personal beliefs about ways to balance work and family. Many other professionals in other fields also struggle with this balance, yet because of the nature of the work early childhood educators experience this barrier in a different way that directly challenges their beliefs about children and families. It is counterproductive to pursuing professional development within the field. For those that do participate in professional development activities, participants identified personal motivations as the main reason for participation. These participants felt supported by both individuals and professional organizations. I think this speaks to the need for affirmation amongst early childhood educators to not only share information about their program needs, but also to share the unique emotional experiences that occur in early childhood education programs. In an attempt to describe the unique emotional aspects of the field of early childhood education, participant responses indicate abstract concepts such as love and caring, however these are fluid in nature and therefore continue to present a challenge to the field in terms of self-identification. When asked to rank various attributes of the profession, participants were particularly vocal about the difficulty of ranking such important components. This indicates a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of the important aspects of the field, however it is inconsistent with how participants described distinct components of the field. An example of this inconsistency is in the identification of the ability to establish and maintain a safe environment for children as the most important skill or

ability for an early childhood educator, yet the inability to consistently articulate those skill sets when asked about job responsibilities.

### *Defining the profession*

In the analysis of aspects of defining the profession, there were three main components to how educators might define early childhood education. These three areas, functional aspects, community support, and policy of a profession, are a condensed version of general aspects of a profession. Consistent with participant responses in the questionnaire, both interview and focus group participants were challenged with clearly defining the pieces that make up early childhood education. All participants identified knowledge and skills as necessary to the job, but were unable to articulate specific attributes of either knowledge or skills or participants identified qualities of a person rather than a skill set. This is because of the duality of the nature of early childhood education. Educators provide for both the physical and emotional care of young children and skills as well as traits are required for this field. Along these same lines, participants identified that some things just can't be taught. This is evident in responses that incorporated aspects of nurturing and loving people. Also noted in participant responses was the need for the incorporation of standards and ethics into the job requirements. This is consistent with the literature as well as movement within professional organizations toward standardized ethical guidelines however the extent to which standards and ethics are executed in programs settings is questionable based on the inconsistency of the degree to which this category was expressed by participants. I think that standards and ethics are

challenging to identify because again they fall into the personal/professional realm of individual educators. Standardized ethical guidelines may help the field to be able to identify commonalities; however individual educators will still act on situations based upon their own beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. This is directly related to functional aspects of the profession that deal with length of preparation and career options. Of distinct note was the absolute individuality of each interview and/or focus group participants' entry into the field. Some were just drawn to the field, others had been mentored in some way, and still others had trial by fire experiences. This speaks in one aspect to the diversity and richness of the educators in the field, but more clearly this highlights the lack of structure within the field in terms career planning and longevity of educators. Many participants did not plan on having a career in early childhood education. I think the lack of intentionality with entry into the field perpetuates not only the turn-over that is consistent with the literature, but is also consistent with the parent/professional dynamic and has underpinnings of issues of women's work. Educators don't necessarily plan to go into early childhood education because they are not quite sure what the profession is, some don't stay because it is not what they anticipated. To compound the effect of unintentional employment, participant responses identified a general career ladder based on state models that is functional for some center-based educators, but irrelevant for family child care educators because of the inconsistency of education and experience requirements for different types of programs. The inconsistency of experience and education requirements required of state licensing and funding sources within

various programs creates a double standard among early childhood educators. This double standard is one reason the field is unable to move forward as a profession and is a discussion that is often avoided by educators, administrators, and legislators. In addition to double standards within the field, once educators who meet state permit criteria reach the highest level or family child care educators were ready for career advancement, participant responses revealed a lack of diversity of perceived job options. Both interview and focus group responses revealed only one clearly identifiable long-term career choice, which is to teach child development at a community college or university. I think the lack of intention, double standard with regards to education and experience, and severely limited perceived career options creates a state of unease amongst educators because of the ambiguity of the field. This ambiguity is divisive and acts as a deterrent with regards to professional development and professionalism.

#### *Action and advocacy in the profession*

In looking at aspects of action and advocacy in the profession, participants had both active and passive roles. The most common active roles identified by participants was advocacy within the classroom context in ways such as working with families, sharing resources, or providing support for individual children. Participant responses revealed that working with families was one of the aspects of the profession that they felt was the most personally rewarding and fulfilling. Action and advocacy are strong in this area because educators are comfortable and confident when taking action and advocating for the children and families they serve within

their programs. Advocacy on this area is justifiable as for the greater good of society. It is rewarding because of the interpersonal aspect of working with families and educators; the helping aspect of the job. However, only a few educators commented on their active action and advocacy role outside of their immediate environment. Those that did participate in a larger political scene did so with the support of clearly identified professional organizations. Professional organizations will continue to play a pivotal role in mobilizing early childhood educators to greater political action because advocacy on a larger political scale actually places some early childhood educators in direct opposition with other early childhood educators. Professional organizations provide a way to legitimize that opposition. This speaks directly to how early childhood educators are more apt to take a passive role with regards to action and advocacy in the field. Some examples of the passivity revealed by participants was the role in which early childhood educators saw K-12 education taking with early childhood education programs. It is assumed that K-12 will eventually see the importance of early childhood education programs and incorporate those programs into their existing structure. I think this is a false assumption for early childhood educators to base their professional longevity on because the majority of early childhood education programs (i.e. family child care homes) are not governed by any education code, but fall under the realm of social services. This duality of governing bodies again works in a divisive way to split what possibly could be a consolidation of people and resources that are mobilized to take action. In direct contrast to the anticipated movement toward a K-12 structure, participant

responses revealed a hesitancy to take action to actively move toward K-12 because of a perceived sense of loss of some of the unique aspects of the family and social services provided by early childhood education. Along these same lines there was a sense of autonomy expressed by participants who felt they would lose aspects of their individual programs if they were to be considered part of a larger organizational structure. This is a false sense of local autonomy that destabilizes what organizational structure exists and does not allow for any autonomy in governance outside of individual programs. Participants spoke to the diversity of programs that need to be offered to families however the lack of structure within that variety lends to the inability to standardize anything but the basic health and safety aspects of programs. This may come from a true fear of losing critical aspects of program services, or it may stem from a fear of having to be held more accountable within a larger organizational structure. Accountability in its true form comes from the transparency of programs and program quality. Program quality as it stands for individual programs is murky at best. Greater activity within the realm of action and advocacy for the profession and not necessarily children and families or individual programs would greatly benefit all early childhood educators.

#### *Self-perceptions of early childhood educators*

In looking at ways to analyze self-perceptions, I used basic tenets of cognitive dissonance theory to categorize participant responses. Educators either had experiences within the field of early childhood education that were consistent with other professions or that participants were able to reasonably justify as a consistent

with other professions, or they had experiences that were not consistent with other professions and were not able to reasonably justify their understanding of that aspect of the profession. Participants who were able to provide consistent experiences noted participation in professional development activities provided positive experiences for them in both how they felt about the job they were able to do within their respective settings as well as seeing the benefits within the classroom context. Networking and peer group associations' help to affirm educator experiences and provide them with the emotional support from peers and colleagues they may not experience with clients and families. This experience of professional growth and development is consistent with other professions and supports the self-esteem and self-efficacy of early childhood educators. Educators who participated in these types of activities claimed to have a stronger sense of self and that these types of activities and interactions helped them see themselves as a professional. Experiences that were inconsistent with other professions were demonstrated in ways that often cited circumstances such as economic factors and supply and demand to explain some of the barriers within early childhood education. This is a realistic, albeit simplified explanation that does explain limited aspects of the profession such as wages and benefits. These are directly related to self-perceptions of professionalism and are inconsistent with other professions. Some educators rationalize these reasons to try and make sense of conflicting information. One educator can explain that they understand that many clients they serve do not have the financial means to pay more for their child care, thus rationalizing their low wages and taking on part of the

financial responsibility by working for low wages. At the same time, another educator can attest to their embarrassment about sharing their income with family members. This is a prime example one of the inconsistencies within the field of early childhood education that has educators feeling in constant disequilibrium and challenges them to clearly identify aspects of their professionalism. Another example of the inconsistency of the profession is in how other people's perceptions affect educators' self-perceptions. Early childhood educators understand the importance of their work, yet the field is still stigmatized by the concept of early care and education being women's work. Early childhood educators are constantly trying to justify the value of their work, but often give conflicting messages with their clients. One example of this conflict lies in the role of the early care setting. Many of the aspects of an early care and education setting are consistent with aspects of parenting and both early childhood educators and parents have a hard time separating the two. There are negative feelings associated with a term like babysitting, educators feeling that they have to get a real job, or a statement from a parent saying they wish they could play all day with babies; statements like these are experienced by many educators. These negative feelings can be internalized by educators and may lead to burnout and the notoriously high turnover experienced in the field. These internalized feelings may also work against early childhood educators in that they do not provide any impetus to pursue ongoing education and professional development. Participants revealed varied and differentiated experiences in the course of their careers and although this does provide diversity within the workforce,

it can also serve as barrier for educators looking to stay within the field, but move out of the direct care setting. This is particularly challenging for family child care educators who have even less structure with regards to training, education, and experience criteria. The value placed on direct work with children in center-based and family child care is limited because it is still seen as women's work, of less value, and of little importance by the whole of society.

### *Summary*

A summary of the analysis with regards to early childhood educators' self-perceptions of professionalism reveal several aspects of professionalism that can be evaluated on a local level. The first is an overall lack of structure within the field. Early childhood educators' have no clear entry point into the profession, cannot clearly define the physical and emotional aspects of the profession, and personal beliefs and attitudes are often confused with professional roles and responsibilities. This lends itself to early childhood educators being unable to articulate integral aspects of the profession and makes it challenging to define a clear sense their role in the profession. Early childhood educators are confident in taking action and advocacy on behalf of the families they serve but are not as motivated for such action in greater scale without the assistance and structure of professional organizations. The double standard that exists with the administration of different settings within the field often pits educators against each other in larger political arenas and educators are hesitant to alter their perceived state of autonomy. This perceived state of autonomy limits the movement toward greater organizational structure and

accountability within programs. Early childhood educators experience a constant state of disequilibrium in that the intentions with which providers enter the field is varied, there continues to be stigma associated with women's work, and barriers to greater professionalism often come in the form of personal barriers rather than professional barriers. As an antidote to this situation, peer interactions and networking serve to strengthen early childhood educators' esteem and confidence and provide opportunities to share aspects of the emotional work that educators do with families. Educators feel empowered and affirmed when they are able to share information and learn from their peers and colleagues. These opportunities work to offset the state of disequilibrium and move early childhood educators toward a greater sense of professionalism.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will discuss the conclusions based on my research. I will briefly discuss the limitations to my research. I will provide recommendations for expanding on this current study as well as discuss implications for future research. I will also include potential actions that may be taken on a local level to further professionalism for early childhood educators in Humboldt County.

#### *Conclusion*

The research revealed a diverse and dynamic wealth of information about aspects of professionalism among local early childhood educators. The diversity and variation amongst programs, although desirable on some level, really exposed the lack of structure that exists within the field of early childhood education. Proposed training, experience, and education levels are far from what is actually experienced by educators in work settings. Although variations will exist between programs, there was a general inability to specifically indicate functional aspects of the job relating to both the physical and emotional aspects of the job. Emotional aspects of the job often overlapped into the personal beliefs and attitudes of educators, creating additional complications in trying to define the field of early childhood education. Early childhood education incorporates aspects of both education and social services and educators felt that in order to move toward professionalism they would have to give up one or the other. Advocacy for children and families was an area of strength

for local educators and professional development activities enhanced this strength. Action and advocacy on a larger political scale was positively facilitated by professional organizations. Early childhood educators exist in a state of disequilibria with regards to self-perceptions of professionalism. The intentions with which educators enter and remain in the field contrast with current movement toward professionalism. The overlap of personal and professional beliefs and attitudes about work with children and families create barriers to ongoing professional development. The stigma of women's work and the value of early care and education are directly tied to these barriers and are often internalized by early childhood educators. Internalization of these negative feelings challenges many educators to justify and rationalize their work with children and families leaving educators in a constant state of dissonance. This dissonance is offset by participation in professional development activities that help to affirm early childhood educators' unique experiences working with children and families. It is my conclusion that in order to move toward a greater sense of professionalism within the field, early childhood educators need to clearly define all of the functional aspects of their work, both physical and emotional. Distinct aspects of early childhood education that occurs within a group care context should be separated from aspects of parenting in order to provide educators with a clear separation between personal beliefs and attitudes and professional guidelines. Acceptance and promotion of both the educational and social services aspects of early childhood education would help educators to better define their profession. Participation in professional organizations should be

encouraged for educators in all stages of development as well as advocacy and action in larger political arenas in order to move toward true autonomy. Identification and implementation of true career paths would also assist in moving the field of early childhood education toward a greater sense of professionalism.

There are several limitations to this study, including the size of the research sample population. The size of the sample population was very small. Another limitation to this study was that participants' self-selected to participate in interviews or were specifically selected for the focus group so data may indicate a greater inclination toward aspects of professionalism than a random sample. This was an explorative study meant investigate self-perceptions about professionalism in small rural county. Therefore, the results and conclusions of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. The results and conclusions found in this study can only be understood and applied to the participants.

Expansion of this study may include a more detailed look at the physical and emotional aspects of work with young children. Detailed descriptions of actual and practical classroom activities may yield a practitioners theory of early childhood educator skills and attributes needed in high quality programs. Another expansion of this study may include looking at the experience of early childhood educators using the more specific lens of cognitive dissonance. Identification of the areas in which early childhood educators' rationalize or justify their professional choices may help to better identify areas in which professional organizations can facilitate professional growth and development. Research that could be applicable to a larger population

would greatly enhance educators and the public's understanding of the field of early childhood education.

Further research implications include more detailed and in depth interviews with educators in the field. This may include separating center-based educators from family child care educators or looking at aspects of professionalism from educators working with different age groups. Also of interest would be to look at variations that exist among programs with different funding sources.

In thinking about how this research might be used on a local level, I would recommend that agencies and professional organizations interested in professional development and professionalism look to assist early childhood educators in gaining a firm grasp on the job responsibilities that include both the physical and emotional aspects of the profession. In addition to being able to articulate specific aspects of the job, I would recommend that there be some facilitated exploration about the differences between parenting and early childhood education in the local area. Both of these recommendations would provide ways for early childhood educators to better identify the unique aspects of their work, educate their clientele of the specific attributes of early childhood education in their programs, and provide a common language that would allow educators to begin to advocate for the profession in a larger political arena. Facilitation through agencies and professional organizations would also assist in providing educators a means of connecting with peers and colleagues which promotes an increased sense of professionalism and motivation to pursue ongoing education and professional development.

APPENDIX A

**Professionalism in Early Childhood Education**

1. What is your sex?    Male                       Female
2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
3. In what kind of early childhood setting do you work?  
Licensed Family Child Care                       Title 22 Child Care Center   
Title 5 Child Care Center                       Other  \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your job title? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What are your job responsibilities? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you think your wages are appropriate for your level of responsibility?  
Yes  No
7. What is your approximate yearly income?  
Less than \$10,000     \$10,000-15,000     \$15,000-20,000   
\$20,000-25,000     \$25,000-30,000     \$30,000-35,000   
\$35,000-40,000     \$40,000-45,000     \$45,000-50,000   
Other
8. How many years have you worked in an early childhood setting? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?  
High School     Some College     Associate's Degree   
Bachelor's Degree     Master's Degree     PhD
10. With what age group(s) do you work? (Check all that apply)  
0-11 mos.     1 year olds     2 year olds     3 year olds   
4 year olds     5 year olds     Other

11. How often do you participate in in-service training offered through your place of employment?  
 Never     Less than once a year     Once or twice/ year   
 More than three times/year
12. How often do you participate in workshops outside of the place where you are employed?  
 Never     Less than once a year     Once or twice/ year   
 More than three times/year
13. How often do you participate in college courses related to early childhood education?  
 Never     Less than once a year     Once or twice/ year   
 More than three times/year
14. How often do you participate in college courses not related to early childhood education?  
 Never     Less than once a year     Once or twice/ year   
 More than three times/year
15. How often do you participate in other professional development activities?  
 Never     Less than once a year     Once or twice/ year   
 More than three times/year
16. Outside of your job responsibilities, how often do you share your skills or information about early childhood education with community members?  
 Never     Less than once a year     Once or twice a year   
 More than three times/year
- Who are these community members? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
17. Why do you participate in professional development activities? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
18. Is there any person or group who especially encourages your professional development as an early childhood educator?    Yes     No   
 If yes, who? \_\_\_\_\_
19. Please list any organizations related to early childhood education to which you belong. \_\_\_\_\_

20. What professional journals do you read on a regular basis? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
21. Why do you read these professional journals? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
22. What types of people do you consider professionals in early childhood education?  
\_\_\_\_\_
23. Have you experienced any barriers in pursuing your professional development?  
Yes  No   
If yes, what are these barriers? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
24. Please rank the following skills and abilities of **early childhood educators** in the order that you feel is most important: (1 = most important to 8 = least important)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Knowledge of child development
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Ability to observe and assess children's behavior
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Ability to establish and maintain a safe and healthy environment for children
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Ability to plan and implement developmentally appropriate curriculum
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Guidance and group management skills
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Ability to build and foster relationships with families
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Ability to understand children within the context of family, culture, and society
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Commitment to professionalism
25. Please rank the following aspects of **early childhood professional preparation** in the order that you feel is most important: (1 = most important to 5 = least important)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Promoting child development and learning
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Building family and community relationships
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Observing, documenting, and assessing
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Teaching and learning
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Becoming a professional

26. Please rank the following aspects of **professionalism** in the order that you feel is most important:  
(1 = most important to 6 = least important)

\_\_\_\_\_ Identification with the early childhood profession  
\_\_\_\_\_ Use of ethical and professional standards  
\_\_\_\_\_ Self-motivated, on-going Learning  
\_\_\_\_\_ Collaboration  
\_\_\_\_\_ Reflective and critical thinking  
\_\_\_\_\_ Advocacy for children, families, and the profession

27. Do you consider your work in early childhood education a short-term or a long-term career and why?

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## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide Sheet

(All Subjects over age 18)

#### PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Prior to conducting each audio taped interview, I will provide a list of interview questions to each participant. I will interview the participants individually about their perceptions about professionalism in the field of early childhood education.

#### EQUIPMENT AND SETTING

*Equipment:* Every interview needs to be audiotape recorded. Therefore, a tape recorder, extra batteries, and extra audiotape will be available at the time of the interview. I will utilize an *Interview Guide Sheet* in the conduct of the interview and will have a pen and paper for note taking. I will ask each participant to sign a consent form prior to the first interview.

*Setting:* The interviews will take place in various locations, with convenience for the participants being the determining factor.

#### THE INTERVIEW

The following script indicates the way in which the interviews will be conducted. I will allow time for the interviewees to respond to each question and utilize reflective listening skills to further draw out the interviewees.

*Interviewer:* “As I mentioned when we first talked about this project, I’m trying to learn more about professionalism in the field of early childhood education. I’ll be asking you questions, and I’ll be tape-recording the interview so that later your words can be transcribed accurately. We won’t be using your name.”

*I will state clearly into the microphone:* “This is interview number \_\_\_\_\_, and I am interviewing an early childhood educator who teaches in a \_\_\_\_\_ program with children ages \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Interviewer:* “What drew you to the field of ECE?”

*Interviewer:* “What are the most rewarding aspects of your work?”

*Interviewer:* “What are the most challenging aspects of your work?”

*Interviewer:* “Describe the skills and knowledge that you feel should be required for early childhood educators?”

*Interviewer:* “Describe the qualities or characteristics that you feel should be required of early childhood educators?”

*Interviewer:* “How would you describe a career ladder for ECE/CD?”

*Interviewer:* “Describe the qualities and characteristics of a professional in the field of ECE/CD?”

*Interviewer:* “Describe any barriers/challenges you think exist in the field of ECE/CD with regards to professionalism?”

*Interviewer:* “How do you explain/understand the low pay of early childhood educators?”

*Interviewer:* “Where do you see the field of ECE/CD in ten years?”

#### **TERMINATING THE INTERVIEW**

*Interviewer:* “That’s the end of the interview. I want to thank you for taking the time to discuss these issues with me. Your comments will be very useful. I’ll let you know when the project is completed and will make copies available in the library at HSU so that you can see the final product. Thank you for your time. Before we conclude, I wanted to ask if you have any questions for me? (I’ll respond to any questions they ask.)

## APPENDIX C

### Focus Group Guide Sheet

(All Subjects over age 18)

#### PREPARING FOR THE FOCUS GROUP

Prior to conducting the audio taped focus group, I will review the scope of the research with the participants. I will ask the focus group participants individually about their perceptions about professionalism in the field of early childhood education.

#### EQUIPMENT AND SETTING

*Equipment:* This focus group needs to be audio tape recorded. Therefore, a tape recorder, extra batteries, and extra audiotape will be available at the time of the focus group meeting. I will utilize a *Focus Group Guide Sheet* in the conduct of the session and will have a pen and paper for note taking. I will ask each participant to sign a consent form prior to the session.

*Setting:* The focus group will take place in the conference room at First 5 Humboldt, with convenience for the participants being the determining factor.

#### THE FOCUS GROUP

The following script indicates the way in which the focus group will be conducted. I will allow time for the participants to respond to each question and utilize reflective listening skills to further draw out the participants.

*Interviewer:* “As I mentioned when we first talked about this project, I’m trying to learn more about professionalism in the field of early childhood education. I’ll be asking you questions, and I’ll be tape-recording the focus group so that later your words can be transcribed accurately. We won’t be using your name.”

*I will state clearly into the microphone:* “This is focus group number \_\_\_\_\_, and I am interviewing early childhood educators who teach in a programs with children ages \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Interviewer:* “How would you describe a career ladder for ECE/CD?”

*Interviewer:* “What types of professional development do you participate in? Why?”

*Interviewer:* “How should the field continue to promote professional development?”

*Interviewer:* “Who should be responsible for upholding learning standards in the field?”

*Interviewer:* “How do you define professionalism?”

*Interviewer:* “Describe any barriers/challenges you have experienced in the field of ECE/CD?”

*Interviewer:* “How do you explain/understand the low pay of early childhood educators?”

*Interviewer:* “Where do you see the field of ECE/CD in ten years?”

### **TERMINATING THE FOCUS GROUP**

*Interviewer:* “That’s the end of the focus group. I want to thank you for taking the time to discuss these issues with me. Your comments will be very useful. I’ll let you know when the project is completed and will make copies available in the library at HSU so that you can see the final product. Thank you for your time. Before we conclude, I wanted to ask if you have any questions for me? (I’ll respond to any questions they ask.)

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