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Counter-professionalisation in collective childcare. The case of communities of care in Barcelona.

Abstract

Post-industrial transformations have significantly impacted traditional professionalisation processes. Among other factors, the labour market participation of young mothers and a concomitant wish for intensive mothering have led to more diversified childcare solutions for the under-threes. Collective childcare projects (CCPs) promote approaches based on a home-like care environment, run by educators and parents who have usually not trained in formal institutions, but who become professionals in informal communities.

Applying a discursive approach, this article asks: what characterises professionalism in CCPs? What type of professionalisation is being pursued? We analyse the case of Barcelona, using 45 interviews with association representatives, policymakers, campaigners, educators and parents. Our findings show the important role played by communities of care in defining professionalism and in consolidating a counter-professionalisation ethos, while evidencing their reluctance to pursue formal professionalisation.

Keywords: professionalisation, professionalism, collective childcare, intensive mothering, communities of care

1. Introduction

Professionalisation and professionalism are two long-standing heuristic concepts in the sociology of professions. The first refers to the process by which professions achieve public acknowledgement of their activities (Wilesky, 1964; Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001), while the second represents the discourses, practices, and norms that are associated with performing a specific professional activity (Evetts, 2003 and 2006). They are intrinsically related. However, professionalisation has progressively lost its centrality in favour of professionalism, as it was assumed that all the emerging professions would have followed the steps defined by guild-like professions (Wilesky, 1964). From this perspective, professionalisation occurs through establishing mechanisms of social closure based on a self-regulated community of peers. These publicly acknowledged communities define what professionalism is in their field (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). Nevertheless, recent contributions (Butler et al, 2012; Bellini and Maestripieri, 2018) have shown that not all practitioners in a professional field are willing to pursue a professionalisation strategy as codified in the guild-like model (Reed, 2018b). This occurs mainly in fields where there are multiple professionalisms (Maestripieri, 2019), such as early childhood educators (Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy, 2021).

One of the most important trends in post-industrial labour markets has been the feminisation of work: women are more active in the labour market as professionals and as workers; at the same time, they are also increasingly demanding novel childcare services to reflect a growing desire for intensive mothering (Gallego and Maestripieri, 2022; Price-Glynn, 2022). By intensive mothering, we mean child-centred, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive practices that certain mothers perform, assuming that as committed mothers, this is best for their children (Hays, 1996; Damaske, 2013). Many working mothers thus look for services that allow them to combine paid work with intensive mothering – even if it is delegated to collective mothering rather than their own mothering practices (Price-Glynn, 2022).

In this way, the growing number of users of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and their increasing diversity have determined a need for new specialisations that go beyond the professionalism of the established ECEC communities. Alternative care models based on the collectivisation of intensive mothering (Price-Glynn, 2022) have emerged, such as childminders, *free education* nurseries and community care groups. These collective childcare projects (CCPs) not only promote a home-like care environment inspired by Montessori, Pickler and Waldorf, in contrast with institutionalised (public and private) nursery services but are

also open to parent involvement and participation in managing them and in their educational projects. As such, their more participatory governance and new organisational designs impact the professionalism of the educators involved. New actors, such as parents and campaigners for *free education*, are thus entering the field, creating and sharing professionalism in a space that was once occupied mainly by nursery staff. These spaces thus become *communities of care* in which educators, parents and campaigners represent the source of professionalism for the professionals involved in the collective childcare projects.

This paper affirms that CCPs are revolutionising the professionalism of childcare educators. This particular context favours a counter-professionalisation ethos (Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy, 2021), driven by the informal communities that gather around these projects, composed of educators, campaigners and parents. Applying a discursive definition of professionalism (Evetts, 2003 and 2006), we address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of professionalism in CCPs?
2. What types of professionalisation are they pursuing?

To answer them, we analyse the case of Barcelona, using 45 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with association representatives, policymakers, campaigners, educators and mothers collected in the “Models of 0-3 education and participation in the labour market: a study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona” project funded by RecerCaixa (2018-2021). The analysis follows a grounded theory approach, identifying a series of codes used to examine professionalism and professionalisation in the CCPs studied: guidance, a-legality and community emerged as the most relevant ones.

2. Dynamics of professionalisation and counter-professionalisation in ECEC

Professionalisation as an ongoing discursive struggle

Professionalisation is a concept highlighted by Wilesky in 1964. However, the neo-Weberian approach put it in the middle of the debate ever since the seminal work of Sarfatti Larson (1977). In this view, an occupation becomes a profession only when its members acquire sufficient regulatory power to prevent non-members from performing their professional activity. This power can be triggered *from below* (as in the case of common-law countries) or *from above* (as in the case of civil law countries) (Neil and Morgan, 2000). As Abbott (1988) says, professions are successfully created by defining the exclusivity of a certain occupational group over a work problem. In his terms, the main mechanism for achieving successful professionalisation is solving the jurisdictional contest over similar activities. This defines the meaning of the work (the professionalism) associated with this profession (Ashcraft, 2013). The outcome of this process is to develop a “third logic” of labour market organisation, in which the main regulatory power is exercised by peers rather than the market and bureaucracy (Freidson, 2001). In this sense, professional membership provides an extra-organisational and autonomous place in which practitioners define the broader discourses and the specific practices that constitute their professionalism (Garcia and Barbour, 2018). In sum, successful professionalisation ensures status to the members of a profession and secures their professional autonomy (Sela-Sheffy, 2022).

However, advocates of neo-Weberian approaches to professions fail to recognise the ideal-typical process set out by Wilesky as a historical and contextual solution to the problem of jurisdiction (Neil and Morgan, 2000). Growing empirical evidence (among others: Garcia and Barbour, 2018; Maestriperi, 2019; Sela-Sheffy, 2022) shows that, although contemporary post-industrial economies increasingly rely on expert labour, only some of the new occupations follow a guild-like formal professionalisation. Thus, a static vision of professions has been increasingly questioned, as professionalism becomes plural (Maestriperi, 2019) and less adherent to the guild-like model (Reed, 2018b).

The first theory that questioned Wilesky’s view of professionalisation as a universal, legitimised process was the interactionism stream. Authors such as Becker (1962) and Hughes (1963) questioned the supposed neutrality of the term professions, since it is also used by practitioners to claim status as elite workers. Instead, they draw attention to the *enactment* of professionalism: to be accepted as a member of a professional group, practitioners have to learn how to play the part (Hodgson, 2005). More recently, Watson (2002) promoted studying how people use the notions of professions and professionalism to account for what they do in their work. Professional talk becomes a way of studying how organised occupational groups meet their collective goals, instead of looking at “special” or “distinctive” occupations. Interactionist critics paved the way for the development of a Foucauldian stream of theory based on the analysis of discursive stances of professionalism,

with seminal interventions from Fournier (1999) and Evetts (2003 and 2006). The focus shifted to the discursive stances used in positioning oneself as a professional that act as forms of control (Vaidyanathan, 2012). Evetts' (2003) definition of professionalism *from within* draws the attention of scholars to the in-group definition that practitioners give to a professional activity, a step before developing formal peer-managed intermediary associations (the aforementioned *from above* or *from below* professionalisation).

Studies have also confirmed the validity of a discursive approach regarding professionalisation. In this vision, a professionalisation process is already occurring when constructing the discourse associated with a specific activity (Ashcraft, 2013). Professionalisation defines a shared discourse about *being a good professional* (Hodgson, 2005), which may or may not be granted some publicly-enforced recognition issued by peer-managed intermediary associations, as required by the guild-like model (Reed, 2018b). In fact, Reed (2018a) focused on the professionalisation of UK public relations, and the role played by corporations in it. She presents professionalisation as an individual practitioner's identity project within organisations.

Discursive practices are also fundamental in defining the boundaries of a profession. In their study of US librarians, Garcia and Barbour (2018) demonstrated how professionalisation is an ongoing communicative and macro-social process that develops from the everyday threats faced by practitioners in the defence of their professionalism, here intended as a shared discourse on their professional activity. Noordegraaf and Schinkel (2011) tread a similar path in analysing healthcare managers. They highlight that professionalism is a concept which is constantly constructed through disputes in the workplace. In this sense, they are closer to studies that focus on discursive boundary work as a basis for solving jurisdictional conflicts (Bucher et al, 2016).

Lastly, Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy (2021) recently made a very important theoretical contribution, discussing the case of nannies, who establish a discourse on professionalism based on personal charisma instead of training and credentials; this discourse constitutes an alternative source of legitimacy and autonomy. As such, counter-professionalisation is defined as a discourse on the enactment of professionalism that helps specific occupational communities in triggering processes of distinction from similar groups, but without relying on formal institutions (Sela-Sheffy, 2022). They define occupational communities as a "group of people that consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from work; who share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to but extend work beyond work-related matters; and whose social relationships melt work and leisure (Van Manen and Barley, 1984: 287)". As Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy (2021) argue, informal occupational communities shape processes of counter-professionalisation that oppose mainstream discourses driven by institutions and professional associations.

The concept of counter-professionalisation is the heuristic tool that we will use to analyse the case of CCPs in Barcelona. Like the nannies in Jerusalem (Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy, 2021), they resist answering formal institutions and construct an alternative professionalism that informs a counter-professionalisation process in opposition to formal regulation. This happens within the context of a generalised injunction to professionalisation affecting the ECEC sector, drastically changing the requirements for entering the private and public childcare professions, as we will see in the next section.

Current professionalisation status of early-childhood education

ECEC professions have usually been considered semi-professions (or proto-professionals, see Saks, 2015) by sociologists inspired by neo-Weberian approaches (Yurchenko and Masurov, 2014). In their terms (Etzioni, 1969), an occupation is a semi-profession when the knowledge on which its jurisdiction is based is less developed than in a "full" profession, implying a lower grade of autonomy, discretion and formal credentials (Vaidyanathan, 2012). Semi-profession is a word that has usually been associated with professions performed mainly by women (Ashcraft, 2013). Although scholars that employ it claim that it is a neutral analytical category (Yurchenko and Masurov, 2014; Saks, 2015), it carries a certain level of implicit discrimination against feminised jobs, including early childhood education (Lyons, 2012; Cook et al, 2013; Andrew, 2015; Simmie and Murphy, 2021). However, the use of this terminology becomes even more problematic in ECEC, a field in which practitioners are increasingly required to have credentials and formal training determined by neoliberal trends in education (Andrew, 2015; Hunkin, 2021). This process of professionalisation has been promoted in national public reforms, with international public agencies such as the OECD strongly advocating for it (Simmie and Murphy, 2021); the aim is to build quality ECEC services based on measurable indicators, universal standards and credentialism that stresses education over care. Public reforms thus see the

professionalisation of the ECEC workforce as one way to improve the quality of education and increase returns on investment in terms of better future school performance (Hunkin, 2021).

In fact, growing investment in ECEC has expanded the sector and the number of workers in it but has also raised concerns about the quality of the services offered (León et al., 2019). Heightened accountability, higher educational standards, certified competencies and more sophisticated knowledge have been the neoliberal answer to these concerns inspired by New Public Management – at least in school-like services such as nurseries (Andrew, 2015). However, the increasing obligation for ECEC workers to have credentials is rooted in the context of accountability and performance-linked reforms, which contrast with a “*from below*” professionalisation process triggered by workers themselves (Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2009; Simmie and Murphy, 2021). Professionalism in school-like childhood services has thus been constructed “*from above*” by public agencies and governments, and primarily highlights formal educational credentials rather than building on practitioners’ definitions of professionalism (Osgood, 2009; Lyons, 2012; Andrew, 2015; Hunkin, 2021).

Something very different occurs for non-school centres, childminders and other home-based carers. Policies have progressively left a deep fault line between the two workforces. While school-based services have been increasingly subjected to demands for credentials, with the policy discourse seeing practitioners as experts educating young children, workers in collective childcare show lower levels of qualifications, pay and employment conditions, with strong differentiation in terms of policy regulation between countries (Moss, 2006). At the same time, these projects represent a valuable alternative for mothers who would like to be more involved in the education and care of their children (Gallego and Maestripieri, 2022; Price-Glynn, 2022). However, the lack of public regulation leaves space for these educators to build up their own professionalism, in contrast with the credentialism triggered by public agencies regarding institutionalised childcare. The prevalent discourse in CCPs is that of the *substitute mother* (Moss, 2006), which emphasises the emotional capacity of the worker and an innate inclination towards care over the competencies that can be acquired through formalised courses (Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy, 2021). However, empirical evidence collected from workers highlights that lacking the credentials that education workers have is not seen as a disadvantage but as a specific competence of childcare workers that stresses the *care* requirements of their job over *education* (Cook et al, 2013).

We argue in this paper that practitioners in non-schooling services such as CCPs develop processes of counter-professionalisation *from within*, based on care, and that these discourses constitute their professionalism and hinder their formal process of professionalization. The following section will provide empirical evidence for this counter-professionalisation ethos, using collective childcare projects in Barcelona as an instrumental case study for our argument.

3. Methods

The empirical evidence used in this article stems from the data collected in the “Models of 0-3 education and participation in the labour market: a study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona” project, funded by RecerCaixa (2019-2021). This project aimed to study women’s decision-making after the birth of a child in relation to the labour market and childcare services. One original contribution of this research was to focus on women who opt for CCPs: collaborative and citizen-based initiatives that are becoming an alternative to institutionalised childcare in the city of Barcelona. We focused on three types of projects: childminders (*llars de criança*), care groups (*grups de criança*) and free education nurseries (*espais de criança*).

In this paper, we analyse 45 interviews, divided as follows: 11 semi-structured interviews with key informants (policymakers, association representatives, campaigners and council staff), 16 semi-structured interviews with educators, and 18 biographical interviews with mothers who opted for CCPs. Although we did not select by gender (with the exception of mothers), we interviewed only four men (one policy maker, one council worker, one association representative and one educator). This sector is prevalently made up of women, who make up the majority of educators, campaigners and parents who participate most in the activities and management of CCPs. The interviews took place between 2019 and 2021: we twice interviewed representatives from the key associations of the field – *Xell* and *Llars de Criança*, before (2019) and after (2021) the COVID-19 outbreak, which heavily affected these initiatives (Maestripieri and Gallego, 2022). The interviews with educators and mothers took place between May 2019 and January 2020, before the lockdowns.

The structure and content of the interview protocol were tailored according to each interviewee's role. The guide of the biographical interviews with mothers mainly focused on what motivated them to choose specific childcare options, how they managed their work-family balance, and how actively they participated in the management and provision of their CCP. The semi-structured interviews with educators concentrated on how their specific CCP worked and on their own professionalism. The semi-structured interviews with key informants explored the institutional context in which these initiatives function, with a special focus on the current Barcelona local government, which offers a favourable political environment for developing and acknowledging these initiatives. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed with Atlas.Ti (version 9).

The transcriptions were analysed following a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1960) with a mixed inductive and deductive strategy for code generation. Deductive codes (DC) were developed from the debate on professionalism and ECEC that we summarise in section 2.1, while inductive codes (IC) emerged directly from the empirical fieldwork. For the project, we selected almost 4,000 extracts, divided into 123 codes, 17 code groups and 75 documents (including informative materials published by associations and CCPs on their websites). For this article, we focus on the following codes that we consider critical to our argument: guidance (IC), acknowledgement (DC), a-legality (IC), associations (DC), community (IC), governance (DC), legal status (DC), management (DC), passion (IC), precariousness (IC), professionalism (DC), relationship with the municipality (IC) and working conditions (IC).

4. Findings

Contextualising social innovation in childcare services in Barcelona

Collective childcare projects in Barcelona began to become consolidated in the early 2000s when there was a steady increase in demand for childcare services that was only partially met by the public childcare supply. In fact, the ECEC provision in Barcelona was based on building public nurseries (called *escoles bressols*), widely recognised for the quality of their services and staff. However, the high investment required to build new schools and the slow growth in places compared to the rising demand led to an increase in the ratio between children and educators. The ratio is currently one educator per 8 children under one year old, per 14 children between one and two years old and per 20 children between two and three years old. In 2021, there were 102 of these nurseries in Barcelona, distributed evenly throughout the city, serving 8,500 children. This only represents just over half of those who currently apply for the service (around 14,000) and about 21% of all children under three who are city residents (38,377 children). Around 24% of under-threes attend private nursery schools (195 schools), and the rest are either not in education or attend non-institutionalised forms of childcare services that are not surveyed by the municipality (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021). However, the municipality itself, in its last strategic plan for ECEC (dated April 2021), recognises the increasing multiculturalism and diversity of the families applying for the public 0-3 service, as well as the growing differentiation of needs that can only be partially covered by the institutionalised model of care offered by *escoles bressols* (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021).

The local government in Barcelona has thus increasingly turned its attention to non-institutionalised collective childcare as an alternative to the institutionalised model offered by public and private nurseries. Although not officially recognised or even listed on any official register, CCPs have become the primary source of inspiration for innovating childcare policies at the local level during mayor Colau's administration (first mandate 2015-2019, currently in office in her second mandate up to May 2023), acknowledging their capacity to meet increasingly diverse needs. In fact, as well as a service that allows women to work, an increasing number of families seek education that respects each child's developmental pace, more participation from parents in defining educational goals, and welcoming environments for young children – more like homes than schools. Despite their importance as a good practice, CCPs are still a minority option: in 2021, there were 29 childminders active in Barcelona (acknowledged by *Llars de Criança*) and 19 *espais/grups* acknowledged by the *Xell*, with a total capacity of a few hundred places.

Collaborative childcare projects can be divided broadly into two main groups: 'parent-led' groups (care groups), in which parents decide the educational project, and 'educator-led' groups (childminders and free education nurseries), in which the educators take the initiative. Childminders are especially appropriate for very young children. One or two educators open up a private home and look after children from 4 months up to three years old that come from different families in an extended family-style environment. Parents usually

have a one-to-one relationship with the educator, although some projects also organise events for the families. Care groups (*grups de criança*) are self-organised childcare groups in which parents take the lead in the educational project. These groups are usually for older infants (2-5 years old) and are organised through assemblies. Free education nurseries (*espais de criança*) are also for 2-5 year olds. They are usually run by two or three educators that take the lead in the educational project, although parents are required to participate regularly by attending assemblies and helping with logistics (i.e. communication, financial management, organisation of open days and fundraising, cleaning and food preparation).

All CCPs have low adult/child ratios (around 3-5 children per educator), *free education* pedagogical principles and a non-school environment. The families who opt for these projects want to participate personally in their children's education (Gallego and Maestripieri, 2022) and explicitly support intensive mothering ideals when asked about the motivations behind their involvement in CCPs (Hays, 1996; Damaske, 2013). Their involvement in CCPs becomes the primary way in which they can fulfil their wish to be more present in the education of their young children while at the same time transforming their mothering into a community experience shared with peers. Groups participating in these CCPs reflect a solid middle-class socioeconomic bias of people who can adapt to the projects and afford to fulfil these aspirations (Gallego and Maestripieri, 2022).

Campaigners, families and educators have created spaces for debate over the years in the shape of the two leading associations in the field: *Llars de Criança* and *Xell*. The first is mainly oriented to educators working as childminders. The second – founded informally in 2005, then formally constituted in 2009 as an association – has gradually become a forum for all sorts of people interested in *free education* as opposed to the institutionalised education promoted in schools. Both offer training and debates on the methodology parents can use to educate their children and are open to everyone, irrespective of whether they are educators, parents or simply people interested in promoting *free education*. As we will see in the next section, the role of these associations in the creation of the communities of care has been crucial. However, registering with them has never been a formal requirement to become an educator or to promote a CCP.

Professionalism in CCPs

A discursive approach to professionalism implies analysing the discourses that define what “*being a good professional*” is and how these are used by practitioners to justify their status as professionals (Maestripieri, 2019). Discourses usually incorporate the norms and practices that practitioners associate with a specific professional activity (Evetts, 2003 and 2006). In the case of the educators working in CCPs, it is closely linked to a pedagogical perspective based on giving children constant guidance: so-called *free education*. In fact, the CCPs’ pedagogical philosophy prescribes creating a caring environment rather than a school environment and takes its inspiration from pedagogies such as Montessori, Waldorf and Pickler. It implies creating an emotional bond between educators, children and the parents who usually participate in the activities promoted by the group. Its main innovation in terms of pedagogy is the principle of respectful education: the children are accompanied in their development, respecting each one’s pace, and not forced to adapt to pre-established programmes or goals.

It is interesting that emotions and affection are usually at odds with professionalism in educational debates (Aslanian, 2015), but for our interviewees, love is at the heart of their professionalism. In their opinion, being loving is professional and is a sufficient credential to be considered qualified for the job (Shin, 2021). Thus, the most crucial concept in their professionalism is guidance: educators are not teachers but people who support and guide the child. They enable the learning process with the other key actors of the community surrounding the child: parents, the extended family, and the other children in the project. In this sense, formal standards are rejected: the *loving* capacity of educators comes from their personality, and their skills are based on their innate talent to guide infants, their inspiration, passion and intellectual affinity with *free education* (Aslanian, 2015; Shin, 2021). Professionalism is a matter of personality, instead of credentialism (Sela-Sheffy, 2022).

We don't think that's what's important. We believe wholeheartedly that children can do everything on their own. We don't teach: we let them learn. I have always described myself as a guide. We believe that we should be there to help them learn, we offer them materials that we believe are appropriate for them, and we are there to help them, but we are not there to teach them anything. Because just as they learn to turn over on their own and crawl on

their own, they can learn everything on their own. [Espai de Criança, educator]

In mothers' eyes, the importance of free education, and its consequences in terms of the ratio of children to educators and the working organisation within the CCP, distinguishes CCPs from other private and public childcare options. As well as valuing the personalised education that is offered within the projects, parents also consider the CCPs a better option because the educators have specific training in this pedagogy, something not all the other alternatives can guarantee. From the parents' point of view, participating in a CCP allows them to access parent-directed childcare organised in a community with other parents who share the same parenting ideals (Price-Glynn, 2022).

*In a CCP, the ratio is very low: about 4-5 children per adult. Look at *project*, they currently have 20 children and they always have five guides with them. That means that there are a thousand of eyes on them. That means that the everyday routine is based on respect for the children, respect towards other children and respect for the place and the things there. There are basic rules, based on caring for and respecting one another. And in nurseries, I'm not saying that they don't try, but they simply have less educators, it's not so easy, there's one educator for every 8 children. [...] The way in which all the guides have training in respectful pedagogies, then, maybe this is something they have in public childcare, but the private ones don't, so their perspective is different. [Espai de Criança, mother]*

Free education competencies do not usually stem from formal education: there are no legal barriers to accessing the projects, so previous experience in CCPs, a person's attitude towards the children and their capacity for affection are valued more than formal credentials. Many of the CCPs we studied and the associations we contacted organised seminars and workshops open to everyone interested in them. The commitment to this educational philosophy also inspires a lively exchange of knowledge, usually channelled through the associations and informal gatherings that *free education* campaigners – as they call themselves – organise periodically. Professionals working on these projects are not usually trained in formal institutions, but they become professionals by participating in these informal communities promoted by campaigners and active parents. They reported that many educators, especially those working in the public sector, also attend these events, participate in the community as campaigners and apply *free education* methodologies in their job – even if public nurseries do not formally require this.

Moreover, training events are not only attended by people currently working in education: parents are also invited to participate, and there is often a porous boundary between parents and educators. We saw cases in which, after these immersive experiences of parenting in CCPs, parents decided to leave their previous jobs and join the movement as educators, something previously reported as common in parent-cooperative centres (Murray, 2000). At the same time, many educators take on both roles when they become parents. All the fervent activity behind each CCP helps build a strong community of care made up of both parents and educators that adopt these pedagogical ideals together.

This situation creates conditions for possible conflicts to occur within the communities. The most acute conflict could occur in relationships with parents: educators must protect their right to decide on the CCPs' pedagogical projects. However, in the most radical cases – such as the *grups* – the educators are partially or totally deprived of having a say and, even if they are consulted in theory, the pedagogical project is usually decided by the parents, who feel more competent because they have a child, while the educator might not. This requires boundary work from both actors (parents and educators) in the periodical assemblies of the CCP, where the communities of care consolidate and share their professionalism.

“Another thing: so now we have an educator who is telling me what we should do, but she's not a mother. No, I'm not a mother, I'm the educator. So, what's my role here? Because I think that the families who come don't really get it. I'm more conscious of it because I've been working in education for a while, sharing ideas with families, or in schools where they didn't share much. I did this a bit, and for me it's the first time families are really open to talk, to think... But still I don't think they totally get it. It's a challenging idea. It's challenging to think: what's my role, where's my space, what's my own time,

what's my role in the life of these children, how far can families come into this space? [she points to the creche]" [Espai de Criança, educator]

Conflicts can also arise with other actors in the ECEC field. CCPs are viewed with suspicion by those who run private nurseries, who consider their activities as bordering on illegal and unfair competition in the childcare market. As we will see in the next paragraph, this is primarily due to the lack of public acknowledgement of the CCPs' activities as being educational services.

Processes of counter-professionalisation

CCPs are not currently regulated by the regional government of Catalonia or by Barcelona City Council. Despite not being expressly forbidden, the public education regulation does not acknowledge them, leaving them in a legal limbo that practitioners call a-legality. This situation (not forbidden, but at the same time not acknowledged as a proper alternative to institutionalised care) has several significant consequences for their professionalisation process.

First, there is no legal enforcement of requirements regarding workers' training and contractual rights, or for the organisation and safety of the space, unlike private and public childcare. Many of them choose to set up associations or cooperatives, or in the case of childminders, to become self-employed educators, but some are extra-official businesses. In several cases, CCPs have no license and provide educational services without being formally recognised by the local public bodies. This a-legal status has thus sometimes created conflicts with private nurseries, which have to respect stringent requirements to remain open. Although the Catalan *Generalitat* is responsible for 0-3 ECEC legislation, the bill is still under consideration. This is because the Catalan government does not consider this issue a political priority and, at the same time, knows that it generates political conflicts with the other ECEC actors, making regulation on this topic potentially delicate to manage at a political level. Some local public bodies try to mediate these conflicts, but their attitudes depend on their political views and specific contextual factors. These community initiatives are usually supported and protected in municipalities governed by the left-wing Comuns, such as Barcelona. However, right-wing local administrations are in favour of private nurseries, and centre-left ones are in favour of public nurseries. These local governments do not usually support unregulated projects in their areas. This situation generates fragmentation since certain activities are allowed (or better tolerated) in certain municipalities while closed down or hampered in others.

Second, the attitude of associations and CCPs towards obtaining public bodies' official recognition is far from uniform. All the associations have defined specific requirements for accepting practitioners or projects as members regarding pedagogical philosophy, the ratio of children per staff member and the activities organised. However, the most relevant associations in the field (*Llars de Criança* and *Xell*) have differing views on the benefits of public acknowledgement and regulation of their activities. *Llars* has been struggling for several years to officially regulate its activities—something other regional governments in Spain have already approved (e.g. Madrid). As for *Xell*, its members' key demand is for a register in which alternatives to institutionalised childcare are listed and made visible to families as possible options. Campaigners from *Xell* are reluctant to start a battle for regulation: they are afraid of losing their capacity for pedagogical innovation, and they do not want to have to respect requirements or standards set by public bodies. Since CCPs generally operate as private non-profit associations, the educators and parents have the freedom to decide about the pedagogical ideals when implementing a project, something which could be undermined should strict regulation be enforced. Nevertheless, no one actor in the field has a sufficient member base to speak for all the projects; even the most supportive municipalities, like Barcelona, have trouble establishing stable relationships with a community made of several actors, such as campaigners, parents and educators, who rarely speak with one voice.

Last but not least, the fact of being a-legal creates a heavy burden in terms of the working conditions of professionals and the economic precariousness of the projects. CCPs are permitted to operate but without being acknowledged as proper educational activities. Unlike other ECEC services, they are not eligible for subsidies and bring in only what families can pay. This lack of funding leads to the projects being financially precarious, and their workers pay the price with precarious contracts (if any contracts at all), unregistered overtime and without seeing their skills reflected in their contracts. It also hinders the participation of those families who cannot afford the higher prices of these childcare services. In terms of workers' rights, this situation was previously defined as *getting paid in smiles* (Murray, 2000).

"So... our contracts say 10 hours per week, but we work far more hours. And we have to... Well, we knew all this, it wasn't that someone hired us for 10 hours or something. It's the way it works. Well, with a minimum level contract, a somewhat regulated salary [...]. It's a temporary contract, intermittent. And it's the lowest category, it doesn't even represent... it's like the minimum wage and as a category, it's like admin assistant, although it's educational assistant. It is the closest, let's say." [Educator, grup de criança]

In sum, the empirical evidence demonstrates how these informal communities suffer several obstacles to their professionalisation. At the same time, only some of the practitioners – represented by *Llars de Criança* – ask for their activities to be publicly regulated. Other actors, such as *Xell*, prefer to keep the current model based on communities of care. They want to protect their autonomy and shun public regulation, which is perceived as a potential impediment to further developing their professionalism.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article analyses the case of CCPs in Barcelona under the lens of professionalism and professionalisation. Findings show how informal communities of practitioners and parents define a clear discourse of professionalism based on the concept of guidance, as opposed to the schooling environment usually offered in public and private nurseries. Their professionalism is quite specific and opposed to the professionalism typically pursued by public services (Simmie and Murphy, 2021; Hunkin, 2021): instead of performance-based, quantifiable indicators, they focus on their relational capacity to connect with each child. The educators we interviewed strive for care (being guides) over education (being teachers). As such, they are pursuing a counter-professionalisation ethos (Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy, 2021): they are opposed to the notion of the “institutionalised” educator. The existing notion of what it means to be an educator in public and private institutions is well established and is precisely regulated by law, but they refuse to adopt it as their own professionalism. The focus on the relational capacity of ECEC workers is not very different from what has been previously found in the field, even among workers in institutionalised childcare (Osgood, 2009; Andrew, 2015; Shin, 2021).

The projects’ claim for a different professionalism answers the growing demands of those who seek intensive mothering (Damaske, 2013), which takes on its collective form in CCPs (Price-Glynn, 2022). CCPs offer these types of parents the possibility to engage personally in their children's education, to have a forum to discuss their concerns with peers and educators and to become competent in *free education*. Thus, the professionalism posited by educators in CCPs is intimately connected with the role played by the communities of care behind each CCP. The community of care is the space in which professionalism is created “*within*” (Maestripieri and Bellini, 2023) and is shared with parents; it is the space in which discourses are defined and where a counter-professionalisation ethos is established. Interestingly, professionalism is not only incorporated by educators who work in the CCPs, but also by the other actors that participate in the community – parents and campaigners.

However, the fact that both parents and educators are considered legitimate actors in the community and, as such, competent enough to have a say in the pedagogical project invites potential conflict. In some cases, parents even consider themselves more competent than educators – because they have had the transformative experience of becoming parents. This is not always accepted by educators, who, in some instances, need to work to define boundaries between parents and themselves. Tensions between the role of mothers and that of educators also occur in more institutionalised contexts (Sims-Schouten and Barton, 2020): however, with even more porous boundaries, parents’ claims to be the first and principal educators of their children also implies a claim to participate in the professionalism of their community of care. CCPs thus favour the creation of hybrid and informal spaces of professionalisation in communities of care, enlivened by campaigners, educators and parents.

Nevertheless, the CCPs’ a-legal status, the plurality of field actors, and reluctance to pursue public regulation for their activities can lead to jurisdictional tensions. Instead of being solved by regulation as prescribed by the neo-Weberian approach to professions, these tensions are solved through discursive boundary work (Noordegraaf and Schinkel, 2011; Bucher et al, 2016). Professional boundaries are defined on the basis of shared values and a shared discourse on education that does not depend on specific institutions or require certain formal credentials. In fact, none of the educators we interviewed identified themselves as professionals

on the basis of any specific training or education they had received. For them, professionalisation is something more than acquiring credentials (Andrew, 2015): it is about love (Aslanian, 2015; Shin, 2021) and personality (Sela-Sheffy, 2022).

This situation lays the ground for possible conflicts with other actors operating in the field, especially private childcare providers. We reported the fragmented presence of CCPs in the Barcelona area, which in the absence of regional government regulation, mainly depends on the willingness of the local public authority to protect and promote them in their areas alongside institutionalised actors. However, these conflicts do not push CCP educators to demand stronger regulation and formal professionalisation – with the exception of the *Llars de Criança* association. The majority of educators we contacted are afraid of regulation hampering their freedom in organising their activities, promoting pedagogical innovation, and wish to protect the permeable roles of parents and educators that we have observed in this field. Formal, rigid regulations would hinder the fundamental mechanisms behind the existence of the CCPs, which is, as recalled above, the possibility they offer to parents to fulfil their wishes for intensive parenting.

In conclusion, the case we have analysed here offers many contributions to the current debate on professionalism and professionalisation. First, we have shown how professionalism can lead to the birth of a counter-professionalisation ethos (Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy, 2021). These actors consider it impossible to align with the formal professionalisation process proposed by institutional actors *from above*, as it opposes how they perform their professional activities. Second, they do not want to initiate a concurrent formal process of professionalisation as an alternative to institutionalised ECEC. The institutionalisation of their projects would prevent them from answering the needs of the communities of care behind the CCPs, and, again, be at odds with how they perceive their profession should be. This case questions the way in which the concepts of professionalism and professionalisation have been defined by the academic debate up to now, showing that conceptual rigidity will make it impossible for us to study professions that are at the margins (Butler et al, 2012); this challenges our previous notions regarding the field. While many authors have challenged the conceptualisation of professionalism before us (Evetts, 2003 and 2006; Watson, 2002), there is still much work to be done regarding professionalisation.

The case of CCPs in Barcelona shows that counter-professionalisation in opposition to formal professionalisation is not only legitimate but can also be a functional way of fulfilling specific needs that institutionalised services do not meet. On the basis of our empirical evidence, we suggest that pre-conceived and immutable notions of professionalisation should be dismissed, giving way to new conceptual tools that are more flexible in understanding the reality of current professional groups.

6. References

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