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To professionalize or not to professionalize: the case of social innovation in early childhood education and care



Researchers from the Department of Political Science and Public Law at UAB explore social innovation projects in early childhood education, prioritizing accompaniment over traditional teaching. These projects, self-financed and without public regulation, foster professionalism based on emotional and community skills, although they also face challenges of sustainability and precarious working conditions.

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In contemporary societies affected by late pregnancy and reduced number of children, there is a rising tendency for intensive mothering: the mothers of the few children who normally arrive late in life are willing to be involved in first person in the education and care of their children, as well as to find a community in which to share their values on maternity. For this reason, there has been a rise in social innovation projects for early childhood education and care where they can satisfy these needs¹. However, little is known about what workers in these projects think about their professions and what is the discourse they make about their work.

In this study – funded by RecerCaixa – we explored the meaning and discourses of being a good professional in 15 social innovation projects, such as childminders, free-education nurseries, and care groups². All of those projects imply a variable degree of parents' participation in their functioning, as well as being able to be self-funded as they are not acknowledged as childcare services by the Generalitat of Catalunya (meaning they do not receive public funding). The results demonstrate a discourse of professionalism not based on training and credentials but on the loving capacity of the practitioner. There is evidence of a counter-professionalization ethos, which, instead of promoting a professionalization project such as the one theorized by sociologist of professions Wilesky and based on the institutionalization of peer governance, is based on the construction of informal communities, enlivened by parents, practitioners, and activists of the free-education.

Our findings show how these informal communities define a clear discourse of professionalism based on the concept of guidance, as opposed to the school-like environment usually offered in public and private nurseries. The educators we interviewed strive for care (being guides) over education (being teachers). This does not imply that anyone can do the job without specific preparation. Still, on the contrary, the skills and capacity required to be a good professional cannot be simply learned in books but are innate capacities that depend on the person to perform this guiding attitude. Education is still at the center of these projects, but children are respected in their different rhythms of development and are guided rather than directed in their education.

Although the pedagogies that inspired these movements have been established for a long time now (for instance, Pickler, Montessori, or Waldorf), there is still a perception of being an alternative to traditional nurseries, which is now increasingly perceived as schools for small children. The lack of regulation and public funding, however, questions their sustainability, as their economic balance is fragile and mostly dependent on the fee's families are capable of paying. This situation hinders their professionalization process by leading to insecurity and precarious working conditions.

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References

¹ Raquel Gallego & Lara Maestriperieri (2022) **Women's empowerment and social innovation in childcare: the case of Barcelona, Spain**, *European Societies*, 24:4, 493-519, DOI: [10.1080/14616696.2022.2092641](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2092641)

² Maestriperieri, L., & Gallego, R. (2024). **Counter-professionalisation in collective childcare: The case of communities of care in Barcelona**. *Current Sociology*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921241239642>