

'They have tried to silence me.' Beyond policy bordering: early childhood educators forging activist identities in the borderlands

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Abstract

The roles of early childhood educators in England have been marked, in recent times, by prescriptive occupational standards, surveillance, and responsibilisation. Over the last thirty years, early educators have been discursively positioned through workforce policy in multiple, competing, and everchanging ways. In addition, ideal professional identities have been institutionally shaped and bounded by qualifications criteria, regulatory requirements, and by intersections with broader (and at times, authoritarian) policy reforms. This constitutes a process of policy bordering (Archer 2022), which delineates professional identity territory, creating a space for a particular version of professional identities whilst closing down others.

In response to this bordering process, a more dynamic, generative perspective recognises spaces for expressions of educator agency. Analysis of empirical data suggests such borders are, in fact, permeable with educators expressing their individual agency through these boundaries. Early childhood educators appear to be exploiting cracks and fissures in the borders to disrupt authoritarian demands upon them and exercise their personal power (Gallagher, 2000). Drawing on professional life story interviews of educators (n=18), this paper offers novel conceptualisation and analysis of borderland narratives, revealing how early educator agency and activism are asserted in interstitial spaces. By considering the role of borders (conceptual or otherwise) as sites of struggle, where the right to become is contested and negotiated, the borderlands concept illuminates the spaces of political possibilities (Brambilla, 2014), in which alternative professional subjectivities are enacted.

Keywords

Early childhood education, activism, resistance, professional identities, borderlands

The Department for Education (DfE) is keeping files monitoring the social media activity of some of the country's leading educational experts, the Observer can reveal. At least nine experts have uncovered files held on them, some as long as 60 pages.... Ruth Swailes and Aaron Bradbury, co-authors of a bestselling book on early childhood, were told by the organisers of a government-sponsored event for childminders and nursery workers, which they were due to speak at in March, that the DfE planned to cancel the conference just days before it opened because they were deemed to be "unsuitable" headline speakers.

Speaking to the Observer, Bradbury, principal lecturer in early childhood studies at Nottingham Trent University, said: "I received a phone call from the organisers saying there were some concerns about us being speakers. The DfE had decided we were unsuitable because we had been critical of government policy."

He said: "To be told that we couldn't have this debate felt like we were living in a dictatorship, not a democracy." ...

Swailes, an independent consultant who advises schools and nurseries on early years education, was so shocked

that she filed a subject access request, requiring the DfE to disclose any documents it held on her...She said: "They have tried to silence me".

(Anna Fazackerley, 30 September 2023, Revealed: UK government keeping files on education critics' social media activity, The Observer)

This newspaper story from 2023 details an episode in which the UK's then Conservative government's Department for Education had undertaken covert social media surveillance of a number of educationalists. Freedom of Information requests, and investigative journalism (Fazackerley, 2023), revealed numerous cases of educators and academics whose social media activity had been tracked. This policing of early childhood professional development practices, which caused consternation in the sector, is an example of a wider UK political regime which was predicated on centralised control (Cushing, 2021). Such moves were indicative of a "Govian era"ⁱ in which:

politicians constructed a frontier between 'the people' (commonly teachers or parents) and an illegitimate 'elite' (an educational establishment) that opposed change. This anti-elite populist rhetoric, arguably first tested in the Department for Education, has now become instituted more widely in our current British politics. (Craske, 2021, p. 279).

It is argued that tactics such as this surveillance are moves from the neoliberal to "rising authoritarian practices" (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2024, p. 44) in attempts to close down critique and dissent of government policies. However, as the newspaper report also

illustrates, educationalists exposed and resisted these moves, asserting their agency and autonomy.

Overview

In order to interrogate this premise further, this paper draws on critical policy analysis and empirical data from a study in England (Archer, 2020) that explored the activist identities of early childhood educators in the context of increasingly centralised and prescriptive policy incursions. Drawing on life story interviews of educators, this paper offers a novel conceptualisation and analysis of borderland narratives (forged between structural policy demands and educator agency). These narratives reveal how early educator resistance and activism are asserted in interstitial spaces.

The paper also considers the concept of policy 'borders'. It moves discussion from the impact of policy bordering (discerned in Archer, 2022) to an exploration of ECEC activist identities formed in the 'borderlands'. Reflecting on this notion of borderlands as sites of struggle, where the right to become is contested and negotiated, I explore the concept and cracks in the system as illuminating the spaces of political possibilities (Brambilla, 2014), in which alternative professional subjectivities are enacted. I conclude by considering how, despite authoritarian manoeuvres, these resistances and activist identities are expressions of "contestation and hope" (Moss, 2015, p. 226). Firstly, I explore literature that details the contemporary conditions and the ways in which authoritarian moves reached into early childhood education (ECE) in an English context.

Contemporary English early education policy context and conditions

It is argued that the era of Conservative-led governments (2010-2024) saw reduced educator autonomy (Archer, 2020), intensification of performance measurement (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), and highly prescriptive curricular interventions with particular focus on fidelity to commercial literacy and mathematical programmes of work for young children. During this period, the national early childhood learning and development framework was re-written multiple times, and curriculum guidance was centrally evolved from the Department for Education with little consultation. Meanwhile, a sector-led version of curriculum guidance was ignored in government communications (Archer, 2024).

Such policy developments were also coupled with a revived “childcare for working parents” discourse (DfE, 2013) framing ECE, and thereby early educators, as providing:

More great childcare [which] is vital to ensuring we can compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and readying children for school and, eventually, employment (p. 6).

At the same time, and despite calls from professional associations, there was minimal policy intervention in strategic ECE workforce development planning. The government produced a slim workforce strategy in 2017 that lacked investment and vision (Merrick, 2018), and there was little meaningful engagement with the sector on this. In essence, these policy moves, and sector responses were indicative of what Nagasawa (2020) terms “an old fight” (p. 224).

Despite this lack of ambitious and strategic vision, the roles of early childhood educators in England have been marked, in recent times, by prescriptive occupational standards (Archer, 2022), surveillance (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016) and responsabilisation (Nutall, et. al., 2022). Over the last twenty years, early educators have increasingly been discursively positioned through workforce policy in multiple, competing, and everchanging ways. Such policy flux, and the resulting redefinitions of purpose of early educators, is reflected by Goouch and Powell (2017), who reflect on numerous changing discourses:

politicians and policy makers who [are] constantly... treating the practitioners as ‘palimpsests’ inscribing, cleaning, and re-inscribing those who work with babies and young children (p. 2).

In addition, ideal versions of professional identities have been institutionally shaped and bounded by qualifications criteria, regulatory requirements, and by intersections with broader (and at times authoritarian) policy reforms. As developed by Archer (2022) this constitutes a process of policy ‘bordering’. This process delineates professional identity territory, creating a space for a government-sanctioned version of professional identities whilst closing down other versions.

These developments highlight the dual challenges of the ideological and practical in the shift from neoliberalism to authoritarian practice and its chilling effect on early childhood education policy, practice, and advocacy work. As Michael-Luna & Castner, (2023) assert:

Regressive politicians are also working to normalize authoritarian practices in efforts to censor critical perspectives ...

Early childhood advocates, teachers, and researchers need practical ways to name, resist, and reimagine policy-based authoritarian practices in local education contexts. (p. 501).

I revisit a previous study to further elucidate the authoritarian nature of policy development and the resistance and activism of early childhood educators.

Methodology

The paper draws on a qualitative study, including both a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of English early childhood workforce policies (2006-2017) (Archer, 2022) and a Critical Narrative Analysis (Archer, 2020) based on the professional life stories of early educators (n=18) in England. This study takes on new resonances in the current era, and I utilise this work to further explore contestation to authoritarian socio-political trends in ECE.

Policy Analysis

Policy analysis was undertaken deploying a CDA frame produced by Hyatt (2013) to analyse nine key UK government policy texts on early childhood workforce reform from 2006 to 2017, an era that saw the significant evolution of broader early childhood policy in England. These workforce reform policies provided the most explicit examples of government-constructed professional standards and qualifications frameworks and the clearest and most instrumental policy vehicles for discerning institutional discourses of professional identity.

Professional Life Stories

Considering the relationships between policy texts (as instruments of structure) and the

agency of early childhood educators, I sought to explore how early educators are positioned in policy and how they form or maintain their own professional identities in response to, or despite, these policies.

This study was approached with an openness to links between narratives and the potential for social change. Whilst this study was not primarily driven by advocacy, I focused on the possibility that narratives of lives lived may also speak truth to power and may call into question the power of dominant discourses (and potentially oppressive meta-narratives) and their relationships to lived experiences. Stories, then, can be viewed as “a process of deconstructing the discursive practices through which one’s subjectivity has been constituted” (Middleton, 1992, p. 20), a perspective that links narrative inquiry to a critical orientation.

Borderland spaces between critical theory and narrative inquiry are inspired by a desire to bring Marxist-influenced perspectives of sources of oppression into relation with individual experience. Stone-Mediatore (2003) highlights formative material conditions but also acknowledges the lives of individuals and marginal experiences shaped by structural discourses. Ultimately, as a critical narrative inquiry, it sought to:

...question how narratives or stories are imbricated within relational plays of power, and how subjects re-authorize their own positions...They are embraced as the site and evidence of agency, while avoiding reducing persons to individualistic agents. (Allen & Hardin, 2001, p. 176).

Drawing upon this and other research (Souto-Manning 2014; Jeeong-Hee, 2016), the study built an approach to critical narrative

inquiry that makes visible the enablers that facilitate and the constraints that limit the possibilities to accept, reject, modify, and otherwise respond to subject positions idealised within contemporary workforce reform discourses.

Life stories provide narratives of micro-level experiences contextualised by meso- and macro-level events. In so doing, the personal and political, which are so inextricably intertwined and constitutive, are reflected. Andrews (2017) writes:

Life (hi)story and narrative have much to bring to our understanding of the political; equally, personal narratives which ignore the political context in which a life is lived are unnecessarily limited in their scope. We want the forest and the trees (p. 275).

Empirical data were analysed deploying a Critical Narrative Analysis framework by Laliberte-Rudman and Aldrich (2017) drawing on earlier work by Laliberte-Rudman (2015). This framework was selected because of the applicability of its guiding questions, which focus on subjectivities, ideal subject positions, and the relationships between perceptions of these by individuals and those constructed through policy. As Laliberte-Rudman and Aldrich (2017) attest, there are methodological challenges in linking discourses with narratives. They describe wanting to attend to the transactional space in between discourse and narrative (Allen and Hardin, 2001) by 'mov[ing] data from individuals beyond the level of the individual and into historical, social and cultural realms, thus making critical analysis possible on a social level. (Hardin, 2003, p. 544).

This framework deploys an analytical process to interlink discourses and narratives using the questions:

- In what ways does the participant position her/himself within the narrative?
- What subject positions does s/he attempt to lay claim to and how?
- How do these ways of positioning relate to subjectivities (affirm, negotiate fracture) constructed through policy?
- What normalizing truths are brought into the narrative and/or contested to monitor, position, and present the self? (Laliberte-Rudman & Aldrich, 2017, p. 475).

I consider, firstly, the data from policy analysis in which I argue policy bordering is enacted. Secondly, I reflect on data from educator interviews, which informs theorising about the cracks in the borders and the borderland zones in which educator activist identities are formed.

Policy bordering

Critical Discourse Analysis of English ECEC workforce reform policies (2006-2017) (Archer, 2022) proposes that recent policies create discursive borders around the professional identities of early childhood educators. Deploying Hyatt's CDA frame (2013), I considered that the policy drivers, warrant, legitimation, and evaluation.

These elements enabled me to consider motivations, rationale, and attitudinal judgements in policy which discursively created professional identities of early educators.

Through processes of credentialising, incentivising and surveillance, standards are presented as logical and desirable with the expectation that the acceptance and consent of an early childhood workforce is a given. I propose that these standards are discursively coercive and, through their design, circulation, and regulation, “inhibit professional autonomy and promote a model of technical practice” (Miller, 2008, p. 260).

The structural discourses analysed in the policies and in associated policy texts point to the pervasiveness of a neoliberal and, at times, authoritarian regime. The prevalence of discourses of governmentality, responsabilisation, marketisation, performativity, and surveillance within these texts led me to find that neoliberal ideas are reaching into early childhood policy in attempts to shape notions of the ‘good’ early childhood professional identity. Through these policies, concepts about ideal professional identity through desirable knowledges, skills, behaviours, and attitudes become normalised. As Laliberte-Rudman (2015) asserts, “dominant discourses progressively come to be viewed as normal, natural, ethical, and ideal, thereby bounding identity.” (p. 29). I contend that, based on this Critical Discourse Analysis, one of the ways in which neoliberal forms of governmentality and responsabilisation are formalised, engendered, and inculcated is through setting standards. The strategic workforce policies, coupled with associated qualifications criteria, competency frameworks, and occupational standards, serve as policy technologies and act as a form of hegemony.

In addition, ideal professional subjectivities have been institutionally shaped and bounded by qualifications criteria, regulatory requirements, and by intersections with broader policy reforms. This constitutes a

process of ‘bordering’ (Archer, 2022) that delineates professional identity territory, creating a space for a particular version of professional identities whilst closing down others.

The question of institutionalisation...is eminently a question of power to define and to delimit a space, within which certain functions and operations can be performed. The power of the institution is the power to lay down borders, to impose limits, to enforce demarcations (Weber, 1986, p. 310).

In the context of policy reform and professional identities, such a conceptual border can be seen to define, demarcate, separate, and create an ‘Other’.

Policy bordering as a process

In border studies, the early 2000s saw a processual turn in which the activity of bordering became a greater focus. The process through which borders are demarcated and managed is central to the notion of border as process and border as institution.

[...] Demarcation is not simply the drawing of a line on a map or the construction of a fence in the physical landscape. It is the process through which borders are constructed and the categories of difference or separation created (Newman, 2007, p.35).

Building on the premise that professional identities are partially shaped through policy text, I question the extent to which the production and circulation of workforce reform policies are an act of bordering that defines and attempts to contain the ideal

professional identities of early educators. Through the policy analysis, I propose that versions of identities are constructed through policy- such as regulating views and setting normative professional standards – is an attempt at a disciplinary process of bordering.

This process of bordering (whether it is acknowledged as so or not) might be justified in the quest for improved standards or quality outcomes for children. I consider that this process might be read as a process of governmentality. That is to say, I suggest that through the bordering of professional identities by means of policy, educators are classified, ordered, controlled, and coerced into willing participation in this governmentality. However, it could be argued that as convincing an argument as this is, such a description does not acknowledge the agency of educators to resist or negotiate these professional identities.

Reconceptualising professional identity borderlands

Notably, identifying and naming the discursive borders that contain particular versions of professional identities only provides a partial picture. Analysing the empirical data generated led me to see the ways in which participant educators challenged assumptions and mediated policy boundaries of identity construction, as they differentiated between those expectations they were prepared to compromise on and those they were not. In short, they positioned themselves. Rather than solely critiquing (and to some extent, therefore) affirming the power of the border, I reconceptualise the professional identity constructions of practitioners in terms of borderlands.

Interview data coded according to the guiding questions in the analytical framework (Laliberte-Rudman & Aldrich, 2017) reveal a number of responses from participants that might be described as discourses in between structure and agency: borderland discourses. These narratives contain expressions of multiple subject positions, both subject positions constructed through policy and those experienced and claimed by participants. Those claimed include activist identities:

Fran: *"So the activist stuff is because of policy and how fundamentally flawed a lot of the policy is. I just think a lot of what is being asked of us is not right, and it's not fair on children. And that's why I take the stand that I take... I will not do things to get data, and that is the problem I am going to have. I won't cram with children."*

Stella: *"And sometimes it feels as if we are just fighting to stay alive really, the principle and the ethos about the way children are best supported for their learning and development against what feel like an assault on it really... I think there is also a pushback by the sector as well, a vigorous defence mounted in the last year against what has seemed like a mounting assault from outside, against the play-based, evidence-based pedagogy of early years."*

Sylvia: *"I can't just sit back. I think if you want to be an activist, you can't just speak, you have to act. Because I care about children. You have to do something meaningful. And also, I think it is important for children to see that you are speaking up for them...."*

Mark: *“What I want to be saying is ‘y’know play is under threat here’. You can achieve all this stuff [literacy and numeracy outcomes] in this way through playful opportunities, if you are brave enough. For me, it comes down to faith. Faith in children. We shouldn’t just toe the line because that is what we have been told we must do. We must challenge what we see.”*

These educator stories are indicative of data across the study in which educators contested dominant discourses and challenged authoritarian socio-political trends in ECE. In particular, participants named their activism as a core feature of their professional identity, mediating, subverting, and challenging policy demands upon them and their work. It was evident from educator narratives that perceived policy borders are permeable - that there are gaps in government-imposed policy borders. Through and beyond these borders, early childhood educators are asserting agency and appear to be exploiting cracks and fissures in the borders to disrupt authoritarian demands upon them and exercise their personal power (Gallagher, 2000).

Forging cracks

Drawing on conceptualisation by Holloway (2010) and further explored in Albin Clark, et al., (2024), I argue that early childhood educators are identifying, making, and working within cracks. These fractures can be understood as in-between spaces that refuse standardised lines of thought and normative categorisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). They are spaces of rebellion and disruption to the current authoritarian order. It is argued that these fractures, these interstices made, or indeed

made larger by actions, enable us to understand neoliberal or authoritarian thinking by its contradictions and its weaknesses.

I suggest that activist identities are forged in the cracks or fissures of seemingly impenetrable borders established by policies. They are epitomised by refusal: the power of ‘no’:

‘No’ is then not a closure but an opening to a different activity, the threshold of a counterworld with a different logic and a different language. The No opens a time-space in which we try to live as subject rather than objects. (Holloway, 2010, p. 21).

This logic is echoed by Tuck & Wang, 2024, who “describe practices, stances, escape routes, and epistemic spaces opened by various forms of ‘no’” (p. xv). Such spaces as sites of struggle, where the right to become is contested and negotiated, are spaces of political possibilities that allow radical alternatives to emerge.

Thinking further with Border/lands theory

In education research and practice borders have multiple interpretations. In conceptual and discursive terms educational borders, boundaries, and frontiers may be taken to refer to demarcations of curriculum and assessment practices, governance arrangements, and professional roles, amongst other features, within early years settings, schools, universities, and other education institutions. In terms of this research, I have proposed that, to a degree, the professional identities of early childhood educators are shaped, discursively created, and promoted through policy texts. In doing so, it

can be argued that policy texts establish, enforce, and articulate discursive borders around early childhood educators' professional identities, defining what they should be and should do. I argue that this can be seen as an act of colonisation in which different policy makers (e.g. different political administrations) (re) inscribe evolving constructions of professional identities through policy text. The policy intensification of an arguably previously neglected sector over the past thirty years can be read as manifesting in a process of professional acculturation. A more dynamic perspective of the bordering process allows a space for representations and interpretations of agency. This can be illustrated by drawing on Bhabha's (1990) concept of minor narratives of day-to-day border crossing, or in this study, the personal narratives of agency and activism.

The concept of borders, whilst reinforcing the idea of 'containment,' is inadequate in explaining the complexity and fluidity of this issue. Arguably, in acknowledging the agentic behaviours of early educators, such professional identity borders can be seen as contestable. I contend that discussing this identity construction in terms of borders as demarcating lines obfuscates the existence of spaces around these borders. To study borders as dynamic institutions, it is therefore important to study

the 'bottom up' process of change, emanating from the daily practices of ordinary people living in the borderland region, as much as the traditional "top down" approach which focuses solely on the role of institutional actors, notably—but not only—governments (Kaplan & Häkli, 2002, p.14).

Alternative border imaginaries move beyond the border line and develop the idea of zones or lands around a border. In-between spaces that are created at intersections (whether material, metaphoric, or discursive) act as powerful conceptual heuristics that illustrate not either/or but both/and. Borderlands or border zones are places where ownership and belonging remain unclear. Batchelor (2012) describes such a space as "undefined" and "marginal," (p. 597) and whilst a border demarcates spaces, on either side of a line there is "a quality of indeterminacy and indefiniteness about the borderline territory" (p. 598). In perceiving the spaces thus, Batchelor asserts that rather than demarcating practices of formation, this is a generative space of becoming and transformation.

Much of this work has its origins in the writing of Anzaldua (1999), whose prose and poetry reflect her life at the US-Mexico border as a woman of colour: *a mestiza consciousness*. This can be described as a hybrid, in-between culture in which an individual is aware of her conflicting and meshing identities and has learned to be part of both worlds. Anzaldua proposes that living in marginalised, interstitial spaces are new locations "where individuals fluctuate between two discrete worlds, participating in both and wholly belonging to neither" (Abes, 2009, p. 528). Notably, Anzaldua also draws attention to the borderland as a space both of oppression and resistance, which has further resonance for this analysis. It is here, Anzaldua's borderlands and Bhabha's third space (1990), "which enable other positions to emerge" (p. 211) and here where I suggest that negotiation, resistance, and potentially activism happen. This is a borderland where cultural assumptions and authoritarian demands are challenged by educators' actions. Through revealing a borderland space and making visible and audible the narratives of early educators, I

complicate sanctioned and perceived notions of professional identities and explore the space in which resistance and activism are manifest.

Such a conceptualisation also echoes Leafgren's (2018) study which imagines teachers' "nomadic and radical non-compliance" (p. 187) as a response to forms of professionalism rooted in acquiescence to policy constraints. Advocating for the resistance to idealised and normalised forms of practice, Leafgren proposes that for educators

[n]omadism is a way of life that exists outside of the organizational 'state' movement across space, which exists in sharp contrast to the rigid and static boundaries of the state (p.187).

This contravention of boundaries through a nomadic existence, offers a powerful heuristic through which to consider an activist identity.

Conclusion

This paper responds to a call to consider ECE in times of chaos and authoritarianism. In many contexts, early childhood educators are (con)strained by increased regulation and surveillance "amidst an already toxic prevalence of scarcity of various forms" (Sloan, 2022, p. 398). This article has sought to highlight the nature of contemporary authoritarian demands on early childhood education and educators in a UK context. Through exposing the notion of policy bordering, I have sought to uncover dominant discourses and theorise the constraints on the professional identity construction of educators.

Beyond this policy bordering, I argue that a more dynamic, generative perspective recognises spaces for expressions of educator agency. Analysis of empirical data suggests such

borders are, in fact, permeable with educators expressing their individual agency 'through' these boundaries. Early childhood educators appear to be exploiting cracks and fissures in the borders to disrupt authoritarian demands upon them and exercise their personal power (Gallagher, 2000). By considering the role of borders (conceptual or otherwise) as sites of struggle, where the 'right to become' is contested and negotiated, the borderlands concept illuminates the spaces of political possibilities (Brambilla, 2014), in which alternative professional subjectivities are enacted.

Whilst these activist identities are manifested on various scales from micro resistances to collaborative action, in many cases, they are predicated on a refusal of authoritarian demands. Beyond this resistance and refusal, the early childhood activists in this study took a generative approach, which not only contests authoritarian socio-political trends in ECE but found ways to enact their ethical, pedagogical decision-making and identity formation. I suggest that this analysis offers the field a theoretical perspective beyond critique and seeks to theorise the activist identities of those working in the cracks and in the borderlands. Such work illustrates both contestation and hope (Moss, 2015).

Through naming and platforming activism work in early childhood education, it is hoped there will be greater awareness across the profession of those who have resisted dominant (and at times authoritarian) policy discourses. It is also hoped that as a result, educators might further consider their own agency and resistance/activism and grow the profession's collective capacity to challenge authoritarian demands and articulate alternative narratives.

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ⁱⁱ Ref Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove
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