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Formación de educadoras de párvulos en Chile : profesionalismo y saber identitario en la evolución de los planes de estudios, 1981-2015

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Summary

Early childhood teacher undergraduate preparation in Chile: professionalism and identity knowledge in the evolution of plans of study, 1981-2015

This study explores how undergraduate programmes in early childhood education in Chile have, through the definition of their plans of study, contributed to the construction of a knowledge base relevant to the profession. To address this issue, it specifically aims to describe the extent of the influence of the most consolidated programmes in the country regarding the process of defining their plans of study between 1981 and 2015.

This work is set in an international context in which growing political and social value is placed on the individual and social benefits derived from early childhood education. This understanding emphasises fostering development and learning in early childhood as the main aim of this level of education, abandoning the traditional image mainly associated with welfare and recreation. In this framework, early childhood teachers are understood as key to the quality of educational centres, thus receiving unprecedented demands for good practices.

Professionalism in early childhood education has recently become a matter of world-wide interest, emerging importantly in its own right over the last two decades. Almost all the academic research on the topic has been produced in this period, as well as government policies aimed at early childhood teachers' professionalisation. As far as policies are concerned, this interest has arisen as a result of the keen concern caused by the evidence of research consistently indicating that the quality of most early childhood education centres is poor. In particular, the evidence showing that early childhood teachers' practices are lacking and do not foster children's development and learning has become a concern in itself. As a result, governments in numerous countries have supported policies aimed at improving early childhood teacher preparation as a strategy for their professionalisation. Examples of this type of effort can be found in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and in several states in the United States of America, as well as in Brazil, Colombia and Cuba.

In the academic realm, interest in professionalism in early childhood education emerged in the middle of the eighties in the United States, after deficient preparation, low salaries, precarious working conditions and low social recognition for early childhood teachers were confirmed. The comparatively limited research accumulated since then has concentrated on English-speaking countries, specifically Australia, the United States, England and New Zealand. In Latin America, this topic has been addressed incidentally in a limited amount of research. This is probably due to the fact that university preparation of early childhood teachers has only occurred recently in almost this entire region.

Early childhood teacher preparation has been identified as one of the most important deficits of professionalism in this field. In this sense, the ability of programmes in early childhood education to develop students' capabilities to properly educate young children has been questioned. In particular, the broad heterogeneity of these programmes in early childhood education has been highlighted. This has been interpreted as reflecting a lack of one of the core criteria of professionalism, which is the existence of shared knowledge base. Therefore, prominent representatives in the field have emphasised the need to agree the knowledge base imparted during preparation. In this context, early childhood teacher programmes have been identified as key actors to taking on this challenge.

Noting the lack of international research on early childhood teacher preparation and its relationship with professionalism, this work aims to further develop this research strand. Designed as a descriptive multiple case study, it analyses the evolution of the plans of study in five of the most consolidated undergraduate early childhood teacher programmes in Chile between 1981 and 2015, exploring the relative degrees of influence of their own faculties and other actors in the field on this process.

Chapter 1 presents the main theoretical views on the construction of the knowledge base of professionalism, expounding the existing debate between the essentialistic and ideological perspectives. It establishes that the essentialistic viewpoint understands professionalism as having distinct traits, while the ideological view sees professionalism as aimed at controlling their own work. By referring to the fledgling research on early

childhood education, this chapter shows that there is widespread agreement that early childhood teachers constitute an occupation whose professional status is low.

This chapter also describes the attributes of the knowledge base of professionalism, focusing on the three main types associated with the professional work: formal, practical and everyday. When discussing their practical and symbolic functions, the chapter asserts that only the first one has been understood as legitimate in professional work, given its higher cultural status. As far as early childhood teachers are concerned, their low professional status is explained as an offshoot of their lack of formal knowledge. Specifically, it argues that developmental psychology –as a form of scientific knowledge- has not succeeded in setting up this platform. Moreover, it suggests that the association of this occupation with maternal knowledge and notions of traditional childcare –everyday knowledge- has reinforced this position.

The first chapter also explains the role of universities in constructing and transmitting the professions' knowledge base, highlighting the importance of defining the plans of study regarding the latter task. Accounting for their permanent interaction with other actors, this chapter suggests that universities' autonomy is restricted to varying degrees, according to the occupation being dealt with. As regards early childhood teacher programmes, the chapter describes ambivalence concerning state influence over defining their plans of study: on one hand, this is interpreted as a boost that encourages professionalisation, but, on the other, it is seen as a factor that undermines their capacity for agency.

Chapter 2 analyses the evolution of early childhood teacher preparation in Chile between 1944 and 2015, suggesting that three sociocultural processes have led to transformations in how this process is understood. The first is the sustained increase in women's participation in the labour market, which increased the demand for early childhood education and, as a result, promoted the creation of undergraduate programmes in early childhood education. The second process is the greater value society now places on early childhood education, which implies an understanding of the complexity of the early childhood teacher's role and, as a result, stricter requirements regarding their preparation. The third process refers to the intensification of state

regulations on teaching programmes in Chile, as they reduced undergraduate programmes in early childhood education's autonomy to define their plans of study.

In accordance with these processes, this chapter suggests –as part of this research contribution- that undergraduate preparation of early childhood teachers in Chile has gone through three phases. The first was between 1944 and 1967 in the general context of fledgling early childhood teacher programmes and an academically selective higher education system. Defined as technical preparation, the plans of study in this phase lasted two or three years, with an emphasis on General Preparation. The second phase occurred between 1968 and 1998 in the context of the consolidation of early childhood teacher undergraduate preparation and a higher education system that was opening up to the market. Characterised by understanding early childhood education as a teaching specialty, the plans of study in this phase introduced courses that were common to other pedagogy programmes. Likewise, they were extended to four years and included courses involving theorising on the educational phenomenon. The third phase occurred between 1999 and 2015, with early childhood education declared part of the national educational system, and higher education being subject to stricter state regulation. Having been awarded professional recognition, the plans of study of undergraduate programmes in early childhood education began to incorporate courses in research methodology as well as a thesis as a requirement to obtain the degree.

Chapter 3 describes the evolution of the plans of study between 1981 and 2015 in the cases included in this research, with a focus on the content incorporated and the amount of time assigned to each area of knowledge. This analysis reflects the important heterogeneity between the two criteria, both for each case individually as well as when they are compared. Specifically regarding their content, these are characterised by their great variety, both in the subject matter they deal with as well as the topics each puts an emphasis on. Common to all the areas of knowledge considered here, the way this is dispersed is seen particularly clearly in the categories of General Preparation, Research, Electives and Disciplines. As far as the timeframes assigned to each area of knowledge are concerned, the analysis also finds important differences in all of them. These differences occur in each case individually as well as when they are compared and are more pronounced in the Elective and Disciplines categories.

This chapter also discusses the implications of these findings in terms of professionalism. It is suggested that the important heterogeneity in content and the time assigned proportionally to the areas of knowledge within the plans of study accounts for the lack of a knowledge base in accordance with the criteria of professionalism. On one hand, the heterogeneous contents are interpreted as a demonstration of the absence of a shared knowledge base within undergraduate programmes in early childhood education. On the other hand, the heterogeneous time assigned proportionally to areas of knowledge is interpreted as evidence of the lack of a theoretical model that guides the definition of the plans of study. In the same way, the fledgling reflections of scholars on this matter are understood as an obstacle to creating a consciousness community, that is to say, one of the foundations for constructing professionalism in this field.

Chapter 4 analyses the existence of three of this field's identity principles within the plans of study: holistic development, play and children's rights, confirming the fledgling presence for all three. Regarding holistic development, this chapter suggests that, in terms of professionalism, this lack questions the preparation's capability to transmit the knowledge needed to comply with early childhood education's very purpose. As to play, from the point of view of professionalism, this chapter casts serious doubts on preparation's ability to comply with this occupation's distinctive procedure. Faced with scholars' complacent vision of how holistic development and play have been addressed during preparation, this chapter hypothesises on the –tacit- supposition that this knowledge can be obtained from the family milieu, implying the presence of everyday –i.e. non-professional- knowledge.

With regard to children's rights, this chapter proposes that, from the perspective of professionalism, their fledgling presence does not seize the potential that this principle – because of its important level of social legitimacy- has to increase the prestige of the knowledge base of early childhood education. When observing the scholars' satisfaction with how children's rights have been approached, this chapter suggests that they lack a coherently articulated discourse that exalts their own knowledge base, thus casting aside one of the main resources of the ideology of professionalism.

Chapter 5 analyses three sources of tension contained in the plans of study of the cases included in this research. The first –early childhood education as a singular

profession versus a teaching specialty- can be observed in the loss of the preponderance of General Preparation and in the insertion of core courses common to all teaching programmes, reducing the declared singularity of early childhood teaching. Noting the scholars' complacency about this trend, this chapter suggests that they have valued it becoming a teaching specialty, looking to establish the institutional component of professionalism by obtaining university credentials of a higher status.

The second source of tension –a humanistic preparation approach versus a scientific one- can be seen in the juxtaposition of both approaches within the five cases' plans of study. With scholars not making an issue of the lack of conceptual integration in this arrangement, this chapter hypothesises that these early childhood teacher programmes – all situated in a context of important organisational weakness- have defined their plans of study by imitating diverse examples in the field. Therefore, it is suggested that a process of allomorphy, with traces of mimetic and normative types, occurs. The third source of tension –instructional techniques versus teaching content- is observed in scholars' widespread rejection of introducing Disciplines into the plans of study. With no evidence of resistance to what they describe as a forced rupture with the history of preparation induced by public policies, this chapter proposes an interpretation from a professionalism point of view. Thus, it hypothesises on the absence of the ideology of professionalism in the programmes studied, according to which strategic actions should be taken to dispute the content of the plans of study, aiming to control their own knowledge base.

This study gives a converging answer to the research question: the five cases studied have had little influence on constructing their own knowledge base in the period analysed. Summarising the findings discussed in the previous chapters, the evolution of the plans of study shows that these programmes have not been able to construct a theoretically solid knowledge base. Nor have they been able to decisively incorporate three largely agreed-upon elements of their identity knowledge, or to satisfactorily resolve tensions regarding their own knowledge base. Confirming this conclusion, both the essentialistic as well as the ideological perspective of professionalism point in the same direction. According to the first, both the content and the process of defining these plans of study are a long way from bringing together the attributes of professional

knowledge. According to the ideological perspective, none of these programmes has pursued the legitimisation of their knowledge base with the aim of driving their own professionalisation. Even more worrying, it should be remembered that these findings – conclusive in all the five cases- account for programmes that are among some of the most consolidated in the country and do not represent what occurs in the majority, whose situation is probably worse.

It is particularly interesting to observe that the adjustments to the plans of study that have been understood as contributing to the professionalisation of early childhood teachers have, without exception, all been encouraged by the Ministry of Education through a diverse collection of initiatives. Standing out among these are the Programme for the Strengthening of Teacher Initial Preparation, the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, the Accreditation of Undergraduate Programmes, and the Standards for Early Childhood Teacher Undergraduate Programmes. In terms of professionalism, this viewpoint suggests that the evolution of the plans of study analysed is similar to a professionalisation process constructed “from above”: in other words, by actors external to the occupation, mainly the state. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that this trajectory does not completely comply with this concept, since professionalisation from above implies collaboration and negotiation between the occupation itself and the other part. Rather, as seen in the different chapters, the scholars interviewed claim to have been excluded from how these policies were designed and implemented in their respective programmes, recognising that they initially perceived them as an illegitimate imposition.

Altogether, the results of this research strongly contradict the optimism of the majority of authors who have investigated the current professional status of early childhood teachers. According to these, early childhood education has matured as an occupation and is today in conditions to “speak for itself” in the debate on professionalism in this field. On the contrary, these results suggest that early childhood teacher preparation in Chile has still not been consolidated academically.

This research provides a threefold contribution to the international debate on professionalism in early childhood education. The first is that it highlights the theoretical interest in plans of study by defining them as the crystallisation of the

professions' knowledge base, opening up this angle for research in this field. The second is that it questions the role of one of the actors in the field –i.e. undergraduate programmes in early childhood education themselves- in the construction of professionalism, surpassing the vindictive perspective that has predominated in literature on the issue. The third contribution involves generating evidence for a developing country –something exceptional in literature– allowing for contrasts to be made between early childhood teacher preparation in different contexts and thus looking deeper into the understanding of professionalism in this field.

Nonetheless, it is also important to note that the analysis carried out is supported by a theoretical framework that has mainly been developed by analysing high status occupations –i.e. doctors, lawyers, engineers- and paying less attention to inferior groups, where early childhood teachers are found. Moreover, the study of the latter's knowledge base has rarely been studied in research on professionalism. This observation is key to drawing conclusions, since the available conceptual framework does not always fit the special features of early childhood teachers, allowing, in general, a broad theoretical analysis with few interpretative nuances. For example, although early childhood teachers are similar to nurses – a profession on whom there is abundant research – in their almost exclusively female composition, they are different because early childhood teachers do not deal with an occupation with greater status (i.e. doctors) blocking their attempts for professionalisation. Likewise, although early childhood teachers have certain similarities with teachers –also studied in more depth- as they hold a similar position in the educational system, they are different because early childhood teachers rarely act as a group in order to gain professional recognition.

Nevertheless, the results of this research suggest that, in order to fully understand the evolution of early childhood teacher undergraduate preparation, it is necessary to go further into the theory of professions, since this process also seems to have been strongly influenced by other spheres. First, the dimension of gender seems to be unavoidable for the analysis of professionalism in early childhood education, since several findings can be plausibly interpreted in the light of the feminine vision that has been imprinted on this occupation. In particular, the presence of maternal knowledge and the docile way of dealing with external influences when defining their plans of

study emerge repeatedly in this sense, suggesting –but being far from conclusive- that further research on this strand is needed.

Secondly, it seems it is also obligatory to consider the influence of the organisational conditions in which early childhood teacher programmes operate in Chile, since several of the findings allow for a reasonable interpretation derived from their precariousness as academic organisations. Specifically, the reduced faculty size and the overburdening of their scholars (to the detriment of research) are obstacles for them properly defining their plans of study. In this regard, the results of this research require the country's educational authority to ensure the programmes' greater proficiency in this task, contributing to establishing better organisational conditions. Certainly, this demand has an ethical scope, since the enormous social expectations that the country's latest governments have placed on early childhood education simply cannot be complied with while the knowledge base in this field maintains its current ambiguity.

Lastly, the results of this research also urge early childhood teacher undergraduate programmes to assume a key role in improving their own plans of study. Overcoming their traditional weakness in this respect, and in the interest of their longstanding professionalisation project, these programmes are to pursue becoming the cognitive authority in the construction of their own knowledge base. Thus, more than seven decades after their creation, early childhood teacher undergraduate programmes in Chile are called upon to take on a new world-class challenge.