Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów / Adult Education Discourses • **22/2021**
CC BY 4.0 • ISSN 2084-2740 • e-ISSN 2719-9312 • doi.org/10.34768/dma.vi22.598 • s. 231-246

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THE PROFESSIONAL IS PERSONAL, THE PERSONAL IS PROFESSIONAL? TOWARDS RE-CONCEPTUALISING PROFESSIONALISM: A SCIENTIFIC AND PERSONAL DIALOGUE

ABSTRACT: In this paper, two new and one established researcher (from Germany, Italy, and the UK) dialogue about researching professional biographies in education. The authors seek to build on a personal and scientific conversation to illuminate the critical and reflexive epistemological potential of particular perspectives in challenging the constraints of neoliberal discourses in education. The doctoral studies of the new researchers illuminate the limited conceptualisations of professionalism, shaped by dominant discourses pervading higher, adult and early childhood education.

The two new authors explore similarities and differences in their work, including research questions, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, empirical data and interpretation. Biographical interviews and co-operative inquiry are used to collect stories about professional identity and ways of knowing.

A common finding is that professionalism encompasses deeply personal dimensions in what is a complex conscious and unconscious, cognitive and emotional dynamic. Professionals can feel subjected to external standards and disempowered by constant audit and they must negotiate who they are within these parameters. The exploration of the interplay of past and present spheres of uncertainty fundamentally challenges technocratic and instrumentalist discourses and illuminates the diverse ways of knowing implicated in being a good enough creative and questioning professional. The authors conclude by arguing for a holistic re-conceptualisation of professionalism, as necessarily both personal and professional; and they conceive 'reflexive irritation' to be a site of epistemological struggle in this regard. There is also a discussion on related methodological and ethical issues.

KEYWORDS: Professionalism and professionalisation, education, neoliberalism, auto/biographical research, reflexivity.

1. A conversation on professionalism: an introduction by Linden

I want to introduce the dialogue at the core of the paper: on professionals and their ways of knowing, and how professional practice relates to our biographies and the cultures of contemporary working environments. We go to the heart, as I see it, of the lived experience of being a professional and how the past, present and possible futures, as well as the personal and professional, culture and subjectivities, interrelate. Such rich

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insights, as I perceive it, remain unusual in the literature across diverse professional communities, despite a growing body of auto/biographical and narrative research. The nature of being a professional has been dominated either by a traditional understanding of professionals and their knowledge base – as in high status professions like medicine or the law – or by new public management theory (Fook et al. 2016; Furlong 2005). In the former, becoming a professional involves obtaining what one can call licensed autonomy, a contract with the state in which freedom to practice was based on completing a course of extensive scientific and specialist technical training, with relatively limited subsequent external oversight (Furlong 2005; West 2001; 2009). That world has largely gone or is disappearing under the assault of new public management theory, in which professional life worlds are increasingly regulated and prescribed. Ways of knowing tend to be reduced to measurable performance indicators: if you can measure you can also manage, according to the McKinsey management dictum (Bogdanich & Forsythe 2019).

Both traditional and managerialist approaches fall well short of what is required for renewing and revitalising professionals' contract with society, in the interests of everyone concerned. In the United Kingdom, managerialism and the manualisation of professional work has sometimes produced catastrophic results, in social work, for example, when working with vulnerable children and families; and there is disenchantment in education (Munro 2011; West 2009, 2016a, b). Here creative and thoughtful responsiveness to actual situations has fallen victim to following the prescribed manual, to the detriment, for instance, of empathic and creative social work among vulnerable children and infants. What Antje and Gaia do, in their various ways, is to remind us of the whole human beings at the heart of the messiness we call professional practice, and of the need for agentic, reflexively knowledgeable, creative and ethical practitioners in encounters with their clients.

Antje draws on the work of Fritz Schütze and George Herbert Mead in her biographical research on the interplay of past and present, of ways of knowing, as well as of compliance and subversion, in professional lives. Her study is firmly rooted in the German biographical tradition of systematically collecting and analysing stories, in her case around disorientating dilemmas (Mead 1934/2013; 1903; Dewey 1896; James 1950; Rothe 2019). She illuminates how present dilemmas link with past lives, through an interrogation of the manifest and latent meanings in the stories people tell. Gaia's work is more explicitly auto/biographical. She interrogates her own experience in interaction with others. It encompasses tensions around different ways of knowing, from the sensuous and emotional to the presentational, on to the propositional. The latter has reductively dominated the academy to the neglect of reflexive, subjective, emotional and unconscious life as well as the lived realities of being a professional (for the EC

sector, see e.g. Moloney et al. 2019; Vandenbroeck 2020; for the Adult Education sector: Formenti & West 2018; Fraser 2018).

Both researchers generate diverse insights into the dilemmas of professional and personal practice: of how, for instance, we can be storied by the power of objectivised, overly abstract, 'academic' or traditionally scientific ways of knowing. Thus, requiring good enough space, which Gaia and a colleague provided, to allow other ways of knowing to emerge. Perhaps by using stories, drawing and even poetry to illuminate some of the reflexive irritation and dilemmas of professional life. In such terms, the personal and the biographical really do matter for good enough practice. Antje takes us to the core of a dilemma for an early childhood educator. She also discusses how professionals feel space is colonised by a manager's demands to intervene more, when what is really needed is greater freedom and space for children (and professionals) to feel and think. This mirrors her own biography as a child and the lack of space, simply, to be.

The idea of reflexive irritation is important alongside how such irritation can be resolved: it includes the importance of what we might call biographical learning, and the necessity of diverse repertoires of knowing (Formenti & West 2018; West 2001). There is a need to explore the concept of professionalism, as lived reality; and, as we will see, to celebrate reflexive creativity and critical agency, if professionalism is to be renewed and professionals are to feel more valued, and empowered.

The dialogue began with questions from me about the nature of their 'biographical' research, the meanings of professionalism and its discontents, and the theoretical influences in their studies. Gaia adopts a psychosocial framing, while Antje is more socio-cultural, although, in using George Herbert Mead, she reminds us of the interdisciplinary 'psychosocial' perspectives in the Chicago School of Sociology, and the need for a complementary understanding of the inner world, alongside the socio-cultural. The former can have a life of its own rather than being simply conceived as epiphenomenal (Merrill & West 2009). I should add that my own recent psychosocial and in-depth auto/biographical narrative enquiry into struggles for, and the meaning of, critical reflection in professional lives, reaches similar conclusions: of the vital necessity to renew the sense of vocation in 'professionalism', and to celebrate the creative, critical, thoughtful, agentic and self-aware people this requires (Fook et al. 2016; Reid & West 2014; West 2009; West 2016a, b). So, Gaia and Antje tell me how you see issues of professionalism and ways of knowing through the lens of your different, if related, inquiries?

2. Setting the scene: An introduction by Gaia and Antje

Our paper is based on empirical results from qualitative research projects: one study from the United Kingdom and the other from Germany. Both projects focus on researching

professional biographies in education (Dominicé 2007). Applying two different approaches, the projects illuminate how professionals reflect on their thinking and action. Our purpose is multi-layered. We want to analyze conceptions of professionalism and professionalisation in the light of educators' personal histories, and to show how critical reflection and reflexivity can be encouraged in a research setting.

Whilst starting from different theoretical backgrounds, we have found 'professionalism' to be a useful umbrella term. It encompasses 'knowledge' and 'identity', which are the dimensions our studies investigate. For us, both concepts share a common basis, as both are defined as ongoing and open processes, deeply embedded in socio-historic and cultural contexts. Neoliberal tendencies in the lives of education professionals, and restricted concepts of professionalism, are our main concerns (Gewirtz et al. 2009). We think of neoliberalism as a *mode of governance* (Vintimilla 2014), based on competition which, as it spills over from economic realms, can shift the meaning of professionalism itself: from flexible, situational, negotiable and receptive values, to restrictive, adamant, measurable, and emotionally distant ones. Additionally, due to its neo-liberal ideological nature, 'its anonymity is both a symptom and a cause of its power' (Monbiot 2016; Hooley et al. 2018). Professionals, therefore, may be 'storied' by particular logics without realising it. Both of our studies respond to such tendencies, which narrow the scope of professional roles and put professionals under pressure to perform in a restricted way (Hooley et al. 2018; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills 2019). We are particularly concerned about the underestimation of lived experiences of 'messiness' in professional practice, which is partly a result of overregulation that aims to ensure and increase the 'quality' of professional work (Bainbridge & West 2012)[1]. Furthermore, in our paper, we have sought to explore the dynamic interplay of the professional and personal in both research projects.

The interdependency of personal biography and society – at micro, meso and macro levels – has long been explored and debated empirically and methodologically (Bertaux 1981; Chamberlayne 2004; Goodson et al. 2017). In this vein, Stephens (2017), for instance, differentiates three different epistemological levels to describe the interdependency. First, the meta level of 'grand' narratives (Lyotard 1984); second, the meso level of national and regional narratives, and finally the micro level of personal life narratives. Regarding this point, several authors suggest that although personal accounts of life may refer to personal events only, the overarching meta level of time, context and culture must never be neglected in interpreting and theorising personal stories, from a scientific stance (Alheit 2018; Alheit & Dausien 2002). Narrator and researcher have different interests and responsibilities in approaching a personal story.

[1] It has been discussed elsewhere, which understanding of 'quality' and also 'professionalism' becomes relevant in such political regulations (e. g. Rothe 2019).

While the researcher aims to gain insight into the meaning of life stories against some broader picture of self in society, the narrator aims at generating coherence. Didion (1979, p. 11) states, 'we tell ourselves stories in order to live'. Following the narrator blindfold, means to take the personal story as an 'individual-ising device' by divorcing it from its context (Goodson 2017).

These reflections are relevant to professional practice in education, as 'eliciting past experience as a basis for understanding present identity and preferences is perceived as a desirable … component of care practice' (Apitzsch et al. 2004, p. 7; see also Clarke et al. 2003; Gunaratnam 2003).

Across both the British and the German debate, authors have emphasised the clash between professionalism and neoliberalism as a general challenge in education (Apitzsch et al. 2004; Chamberlayne 2004), as well as the necessity of biographically informed practice, in responding creatively to it. This encompasses the interplay of micro, meso and macro levels in lives so as to better understand the personal narrative and challenge the supposed invisibility of the pervasive neoliberal narrative in professionals' critical reflection.

Before entering into a dialogue and developing these considerations, we should clarify that the two studies focus on the impact of a neoliberal ideology in different but complementary ways. The research project from Germany examines professionals' views of professionalism itself in relationship to personal journeys. The research from the UK (and Italy) presents a study of reflective practice among professionals, aiming to elicit disorienting dilemmas, as appropriate, through creative and eclectic ways of knowing. Both approaches challenge dominant views of professional knowledge and of what professional journeys should involve; however, how we encompass uncertainty and transitional crises in our research varies.

By bringing together our work, we want to address three issues:

1) Make 'anonymous' (Monbiot 2016; Biesta 2015; Hooley et al. 2018) neoliberal notions of professionalism and professionalisation visible, as they normatively circulate in professionals' stories.
2) Describe and analyse the personal side of professionalism and professionalisation empirically.
3) Discuss if professionalism as understood today is good enough for addressing professionals' concerns and the complexity of lived experience.

Having realised, through our scientific dialogue, that there were connections and common concerns, as well as complementary views, we chose to work dialogically (Formenti & West 2018; Merrill & West 2009) to present our research questions, frameworks, methodologies, empirical data, observations and the perspectives that inform these.

In the next paragraph, we start a dialogue on our studies. We each speak of how we approached ideas of professionalism and neoliberalism and our guiding concepts of knowing and identity. In the following section, we present our different 'uncertain methodologies'. We then present the narratives of two participants, Dilbert and Johanna, and analyse, empirically, what is personal in the professional journey. In the conclusion, we discuss more comprehensive understandings of professionalism and propose an idea of how to encourage deeper forms of reflexivity among professionals, drawing on the notion of 'reflexive irritation'.

3. Making neoliberal notions visible: Entering the dialogue on knowing and identity in professionalism

AR: My research project is located in the discourse of professionalism and professionalisation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). In recent decades, the attention of political and scientific stakeholders towards ECEC has risen enormously (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006). At the same time neoliberal assumptions strengthened. These emphasise the child's economic value as human capital in society (Moloney et al. 2019; Rothe 2019; Vandenbroeck 2020). This was my concern when I began the research among early years professionals, because high external expectations can cause enormous pressure, with a growing demand that standards and performance in ECEC practice should be more measurable. In this regard, my particular research interest developed as to how these growing demands impacted professional practice.

The impact on professional biographies is great. In the ECEC discourse, professionals' personal histories are considered an undesirable cloud of uncertainty threatening efforts to make the professional measurable. Accordingly, the professional's biographical experiences are often referred to as something to be made certain (aligned to a reductive view of reflection) in order to subordinate it to a governmental logic (in more detail: Rothe 2019; Rothe & Betz 2018). This reflection led me to analyse the personal side of professionalism and professionalisation. I aimed to generate an empirical understanding to inform the discourse of ECEC, so as to allow the critical interrogation of normative assumptions.

GDN: In my case, I thought at the outset that I had no specific prejudices. Of course, I did. The criticism of neoliberal tendencies (arguably patriarchal, too, Belenky et al. 1986) and how they reduce knowing to a rational and linear process, to be measured and controlled, was implicit in my research questions on knowing and becoming an education professional. This is my story too. I had experienced reductive tendencies in school and higher education in Milan – particularly my Masters in Human Resources –,

and later in the training of adults in the private sector. My dissatisfaction with learning also originates from fragmentations in my family. After a sabbatical in South East Asia, I embarked on a doctoral research about knowing and professional lives in adult education (adult educators are understood diversely as therapists, teachers, managers, counsellors, etc., Dominicé 2007). I positioned my study in a constructivist framework (understanding knowing and living, knower and known as imbricated or overlapping). Maturana's (1990) work allowed me to investigate both specific narratives and the meso level of the setting. Auto/biographical perspectives (Merrill & West 2009) encouraged a reflexive engagement with my own story in interaction with those of the others during the research.

In terms of the theoretical viewpoint underpinning my study, *knowing* is a key concept. In order to explore this, I adopted a psychosocial framework starting from sociologist Bernard Charlot's (1997) notion of *rapport au savoir*, the relationship with knowing. This is a rich sociological construct addressing the 'relationship with the world, the other and self of a subject faced with the need to learn' (Charlot 1997, p. 93, my translation). Knowledge, Charlot says, is imbued with desire, linked to the possibilities or inhibitions this implies for the subjects' self-construction in relation to significant others and how they imagine themselves in the world – which is arguably more of a psychological if not complementary perspective. I proposed to apply this to professional lives, and how it links to 'self-making' and processes of socialisation into particular ways of learning. This can help, of course, to illuminate cultures of work too. Feminist perspectives indicate that women's ways of knowing – subjective, intuitive, sensorial, emotional – are often neglected in education (Belenky et al. 1986). My other key concept is 'self', not seen in an essentialist but developmental, contingent way, as 'a never complete product of relationships we have with actual people and diverse objects, including the symbolic' (Merrill & West 2009, p. 70). The subject has moral agency yet is shaped by access to facilitating environments (Winnicott 1971). As subjects are socialised via forms of knowing, I wondered about the place of creative knowing and living within the educational profession.

AR: Professional identity is my guiding concept (Mead 1934/2013; Schütze 1994). Similar to Charlot's social notion of 'relationships of knowing', the identity process is linked to the subjects' self-construction in relation to significant others and accompanying emotions such as love, hate, jealousy and so forth: "The self […] arises in social experience (Mead 1934/2013, pos. 1989-1991). Thus, the 'significant other' (Sullivan 1953) that you mentioned, plays a major role in my research, as an inevitable social point of reference through which individuals learn about themselves through the eyes of significant others. This becomes an internalised version of the other (the 'generalised other'). Only through negotiating social expectations – agreeing or disagreeing,

matching or differing – can individuals grow and shape his or her own identity. So, tell me, Gaia, how have you approached those different 'forms of knowing' in your study?

4. Displacement and biographical crises: Methodologies of 'uncertainty' in approaching the personal side of professionalism and professionalisation

GN: My participatory design included six, monthly narrative workshops with two small co-operative groups in the University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy) and Canterbury Christ Church University (UK). These were run simultaneously from January to June 2015, with a follow up after three months. Nine participants in Milan and six in Canterbury engaged in metaphoric and embodied cognition, following Heron's (1996) steps of knowledge, whereby the sensuous ('experience'), imagination/intuition ('presentation') and rational understanding ('proposition') are drawn together to develop novel thinking and lines of action. The emergence of a group that allows for friction, and supports individual developments, was crucial. I was taken care of too. The sessions involved writing, reading and discussions of life events, which, together with artmaking, stimulated what we might call *déplacement* (Fabbri & Formenti 1991; Fabbri & Munari 1990). 'Déplacement' in this context means cognitive displacement from previous perspectives, a dis-orientation, a disruption in one's way of feeling, thinking, acting and ethical positioning when experiencing a dilemma. In a learning setting this can be triggered via games and interactions, which may be emotional, and sometimes distressing. Autobiographical writing, artmaking, and group discussion are all useful methods to stimulate stories and support creativity in lifelong learning and adult education (Formenti & West 2018). In the analysis of four selected narratives, I further embraced the methods of *aesthetic reflexivity* through Laurel Richardson's (1997) 'writing as inquiry'. This is a form of analysis via creative writing that I return to below. I also analysed reports of the sessions, to make sense of the group process which included looking at metaphors of the crises the group went through; the emergence of a group 'mind' was far from linear. There was a lot of uncertainty in my research.

AR: You generate a sphere of uncertainty – for the participants but also for yourself by drawing on the concept of *aesthetic reflexivity*. Hence, in this very situation you create conditions of uncertainty and enable your participants to develop new perspectives on knowing. I refer to such moments of uncertainty as *biographical crisis*[2] (Mead 1934/2013; Schütze 2007), experienced as moments of diverging and conflicting expectations that result in the individual experiencing a loss of control (Schütze 2007;

[2] I use this expression as an umbrella term for different terms used by Schütze (2007, *trajectory*) and Mead (1934/2013, 'conflict of actions').

Mead 1934/2013). I find resonance with the practice of *déplacement*, which you locate within a constructivist epistemology offering possibilities for illuminating 'taking-for-granted' assumptions.

In my research, such moments of uncertainty are regarded as significant triggers for identity work, as they free the subject's potential to develop new perspectives on themselves and their surrounding world. In order to approach professionals' personal histories and their moments of uncertainty, I conducted seven autobiographical interviews (Schütze 1983/2016) with female educators in early childhood settings. Whilst you can elicit uncertainty in the present moment, I focus on the professionals' personal history from past to present and thereby potentially touch upon transitional crises that can be ongoing. Such moments of uncertainty that the professionals have experienced may have provoked radical changes of mind-set.

The narrations offered insights into the professionals' processes of meaning-making and how these become relevant for their professional perspectives. Therefore, I chose the method of biographical text analysis developed by Schütze (2007) which draws on the concept of *pragmatic refraction*: It focuses on two dimensions of generated meaning. First, the explicit layers of meaning refer to conscious reflection processes, which result in insights that are consciously accessible by the respondent. Second, implicit layers of meaning are revealed through the respondents' narration as well, but they are (so far) unconscious or 'unknown'. Accordingly, the respondents' access to these layers of meaning is highly restricted (Schütze 2007). These different layers of meaning making are approached by a complex process of analysis: it is especially relevant to mention the second step here because of its significant function in approaching the respondents' narration in a 'non-naive, i.e., pragmatically refracting' way (Schütze 2007, p. 37). This requires a detailed form of written reflection on the autobiographical narrative, in which I generated around 500 pages of written analysis.

Gaia, maybe you can tell me a story from your research? I would then like to tell a story from mine.

5. Dilbert's and Johanna's stories

GDN: The narratives in my study confirm that education professionals are often alienated (Laing 1967; Bainbridge & West 2012) in their ways of knowing, sometimes severing self from other, past from present, affect from reason, and the personal from the professional. Engaging with multiple ways of knowing allowed some participants to experience greater self-integration. Whilst I do not consider this consequential, I would like to offer a vignette. Dilbert was a Senior Lecturer in Education, and previously a head teacher, with wide expertise in teaching the performing arts. Initially, he

seemed to competently reproduce a critical discourse about education, but impersonally – he told no personal stories.

During my analysis, I extracted a poem according to Richardson's (1997) method,[3] from Dilbert's writing – these were three different texts, produced during the third session on learning biographies, using the metaphor of a river. He gave no name to his learning river; therefore, my own poem is untitled too.

UNTITLED
I am the paradox that defines your existence
An illusion of transparent capacity
Filling you with uncertainty and falsehood
Experience, knowledge, understanding
A particle in the sky
No more, no less.

In the next meeting, a reading of J.L. Borges's (1964) *The circular ruins* – a short 'pedagogical' story about a magician giving life to man – prompted him to question what parents and teachers know. A clash of epistemologies took place between him and Vanessa, who, as an art-therapist, was less influenced by accountability pressures.

Dilbert: To have that level of illusion is paralysing. How can we operate within that then?

Vanessa: Oh now, I think it frees us.

Dilbert: Well, frees us to what? What can you establish, what can you then substantiate? How can you operate when you have nothing to relate to?

He drew a mentoring figure whose hands burn holding the books, and wrote autobiographically about two halves of his life, as lecturer and boxer. Later, two months after the end of the research workshops, I invited the participants for a follow-up session in Canterbury and Milan. I proposed a creative activity that consisted of making an object with paper and colours, that for each person could represent what was learnt from participating in the research. Dilbert attempted to reflect on his own values within the functional discourse he is professionally subjected to. The drawing of his childhood household entitled 'The unwritten narrative' links the personal to the professional, Dilbert's learner identity as a child facing a difficult situation at home connects to his present identity as teacher.

Dilbert: I discovered film, theatre, boxing, tennis, football and rugby, reading, shady people. I was very isolated … From this, which is not particularly humorous, I love

[3] This creative method in sociology allows us to compose the original words of the interviewee into a new text, making the subjectivity of the analysis visible; see also in educational research Fraser (2018), on fictional analysis that recontextualises original material into a dramatic text.

the humour in the room … and autonomy: the idea that hopefully we are developing a notion of freedom and independence.

In discussing fundamentalism, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2012) writes about 'getting it' or the compulsion to understand and to be understood, which creates fantasies of purity around those 'in the know': parents, teachers, academics. At a time when education is being colonised by the explicit (and measurable, according to Biesta 2015), not knowing and the self are kept out of the professional lexicon. As a researcher, I felt at times that I was expected to understand more than I could, and to keep my subjective struggles to myself.

AR: My findings reveal how professionals make sense of their practice by referring to their personal histories. Especially past and present moments of uncertainty, experienced as biographical crises, which contribute to professional identity processes. To illustrate my finding, I draw on the story of Johanna:

In her autobiographical interview, she tells me about how she grew up in a home she characterises as very protective and watchful, expecting her always to be proper and well-behaved. Her father was a policeman and her mother a housewife. She remembers that she identified highly with her father and his profession. She chose him as a role model and first aimed to become a policewoman. The relationship with her mother she remembers as more confrontational. She recalls that both her parents tried to protect her from harmful experiences, which she sees as a consequence of her father's profession.

When she began her training, she moved into a shared apartment with her friends. She calls this her 'escape', pointing out that this was a conscious breaking out from her overprotective home. This phase she identifies as highly significant for her personal growth, because it took courage to distance herself from her parents and because of the opportunity to get to know herself in a variety of new social situations. In this phase of 'creative metamorphoses of biographical identity' (Schütze 2007) she experiences a shift in mind-set. Various insights and convictions, which are of importance for her professional self today, relate to this part of her personal history. For example, she talks passionately about gender sensitivity and how she aims to overcome the constraints of traditional gender roles in everyday practice. She tells me about how she encourages boys whenever they express curiosity about wearing a dress, and at the same time, encourages girls not to hide their feelings but to express them loudly. Johanna's childhood experience of being a 'well-behaved' girl and the related conflicts with her parents seem to be significant in this regard. Overcoming boundaries appears to be crucial in building a strong sense of present (professional) identity.

These moments of uncertainty can be regarded as *biographically founded concepts of professionalism*. They define the professional perspective on what children should learn and how adults should behave in order to support the child properly. They are

also relevant in negotiating expectations of parents, the institution, and/or society. In some cases, when personal orientations did not match social expectations, professionals silently held on to them and aligned their actions to their personal orientations, instead of engaging in an open process of negotiation. These episodes hint at the phenomenon of 'underlife' (Goffman 1961/1973): an act of subversion within what tend to be authoritarian institutions.

6. Professionalism and 'reflexive irritation' as a site of struggle

We have asked ourselves if traditional concepts and neoliberal notions of professionalism and professionalisation are suitable for professional practice in the highly uncertain times we live in (Fook et al. 2016; West 2009; Reid & West 2014).

Applying an auto/biographical approach, Gaia addressed this question, showing that education professionals sometimes regard knowledge as distant and hard to embody, whilst idealisations sever the professional from the personal. While Gaia shows the struggle of professionals with conceptualising knowledge, Antje reveals that professionals' concepts of professionalism are deeply rooted in their past experiences. Johanna's story shows how past crises inform the normative orientations that guide professionals.

Additionally, other stories similar to Johanna's illuminate how personal visions of professionalism can result in unpredictable forms of agency, in processes like 'underlife' (Goffman 1961/1973; see in more detail: Rothe 2019). They basically mean that professionals may silently hold on to what they think is best practice. Agency emerges in Dilbert's story too: given the time and space, professionals compose complex patchworks of knowledge (Belenky et al. 1986), which is at the same time both more subjective and intimate as well as more objective and professional. In doing so, they arguably become more integrated as people and more questioning and creative as professionals (the theories and methods they adopt are, in other words, more in tune with lived experience, past and present). Although the two projects are embedded in different discourses of adult education and ECEC, the findings reveal complementary insights into professionals' negotiations with formal and socio-historically shaped categories, which they partly adopt and partly refuse – and thus challenge – through more complex ways of knowing.

Our findings support the case for the reconceptualisation of professionalism which responds creatively to current socio-historical conditions. As Linden mentioned, at the outset, the traditional concept of professionalism is not a neoliberal one. Traditional ideas of the professional come from 'high status' professions of licensed autonomy after extensive scientific/technical training. New public management theory is more technocratic as well as managerialist: it regulates professional practice with measurable

performance standards. Both, however, are inadequate in a world characterised by multiplicity and uncertainty. Professionals cannot, for their clients and themselves, miss out on opportunities to learn from disorienting experiences, to draw on multiple sources of knowledge; and thus, to create better supportive environments for everyone (West 2016a). Educational professions exist in states of uncertain flux, where the only thing that is certain is uncertainty. Managerialist responses seek to close things down and be overly prescriptive, when creative and reflexive auto/biographical sensibilities are essential. Professional creativity needs to become more central to practice, or else people regress into following the rules and into manualisation, that are at best deeply imperfect guides in an imperfect world; and at worst harmful.

Proposing a re-conceptualisation of professionalism and professionalisation as an ongoing reflexive re-consideration, re-assurance and re-adoption, addresses more adequately professional struggles of knowing in their everyday negotiations and in conditions of uncertainty. Professionals are often asked to critically reflect upon how they understand their practice (Fook et al. 2016). However, the depth of such 'critical' reflection needs to be expanded to include reflexivity in the personal sphere of emotions, intuitions, bodily sensations and even the unconscious in encounters with others (West 2016a). Processes of adaption and re-contextualisation imply that the personal is profoundly professional, too.

In both our approaches, spheres of uncertainty were important in encouraging professionals to develop new perspectives. We call this *reflexive irritation* by which we mean that uncertainty can stimulate biographical self-reflection in research. In her study, Gaia elicits *reflexive irritation* through *aesthetic reflexivity* and by encouraging the professionals to approach the concept of knowledge through unfamiliar lenses and forms of expression. Drawing on the arts in a group setting can be upsetting, so to speak, crises can be both epistemological and emotional. *Reflexive irritation* in Antje's work results from encouraging professionals to reflect on their past and present. This sheds light on crises experienced, then and now, which are a source of challenge to established mind-sets. The presence of a supportive environment is crucial, in both studies, in groups and relationships with significant others, including professionals, but also in personal relationships and relationships with close family.

By engaging in scientific and personal dialogue, we have enriched our own auto/biographical understanding. We hope this conversation will stimulate other researchers of professional lives to illuminate more of the personal, relational, agentic, epistemological, contingent and developmental aspects of professionalism in ways that are more supportive of human flourishing in education and other settings, for both professionals and those they work with.

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