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Professionalization in early childhood education: how do educators craft their work?

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ABSTRACT

Job crafting offers an exciting way to understand how people engineer their jobs to create more meaningful work. Work is meaningful if workers perceive their work as significant and serving an important purpose. To examine how four early childhood educators individually and collaboratively craft their work, the study reported here examines data from a case study in a Canadian daycare centre collected over a 16-month period by participating in theory/practice inquiry meetings and individual educator interviews. Educators develop an individual understanding of their job's requirements, individual beliefs and values but also acquire a shared understanding as they collaboratively craft their work in daily informal discussions. Explicit collaborative job crafting could contribute to professional development and improved job satisfaction for Early Childhood Education and Care practitioners. To develop an explicit collaborative understanding of their profession co-workers and supervisors need enabling working conditions such as opportunities and support for professional knowledge sharing, professional reflection, continuous training, and therefore ongoing professional development.

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Introduction

In Canada, as in many other countries (i.e. Dyer 2018; Osgood 2010; Urban 2008), the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is experiencing a trend to professionalization. Professional development in ECEC applies to activities attempting to increase the skills set, knowledge base and attitudinal perspectives of ECEC professionals and practitioners and related activities such as community relationships (Jensen and Iannone 2018). Most professional development in ECEC contexts is in-service training opportunities for educators, usually not contributing to formal credentials or degrees (Egert, Fukkink, and Eckhardt 2018). Requirements for professional development are that it should be continuous and encompass processes such as reflexivity, critical thinking and co-construction within and across ECEC systems (Jensen and Iannone 2018). Educators acknowledge the need for professionalization: however, public scrutiny and external agendas, on the one

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hand, and individual philosophies and working ethos on the other, let educators wrestle with practices and discourses designed to assess professional competence (Osgood 2010).

Havnes (2018) looks at professionalization as development of the individual and their local practice. Therefore, professionalism should stem from within, rather than from above – as 'occupational' instead of 'organisational' professionalism. Harwood et al. (2013) state that practitioners with integrity act in ways corresponding to their beliefs, thinking, values and assumptions. Fitzgerald and Theilheimer (2013) support this claim by stating that practitioners demonstrate ownership of the childcare philosophy if it fits their own beliefs and if they can contribute to that philosophy. The concept of job crafting can influence or even challenge these individual philosophies and working ethos, therefore offering an exciting perspective to understand how people engineer their jobs to create work that is meaningful for them (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013). Hence, job crafting is used in this investigation as a theoretical lens to examine and extract educators' understanding of their work and the meaning they impute to their profession.

The case study at hand is therefore investigating the following research questions: How do early childhood educators craft their work so that it is meaningful and engaging? And how do they share their knowledge and understanding of professionalism (collaborative job crafting)? Can job crafting contribute to job satisfaction and collaborative work in ECEC?

This paper relies on cultural-historical theory (Vygotsky 1978). Although cultural-historical theory distinguishes three levels of the social context: cultural level (features of society at large), structural level (childcare institution) and individual level (individual relationships) (Bodrova and Leong 2007; Hedegaard 2009), this study emphasises the individual level by examining how four educators craft their understanding of what an ECEC professional is and what practices they see as requirement for professional educators. This is important as educators' interpretations of professionalism influence their relationships with children, parents and co-workers (Hostettler Schärer 2018). Thus, this paper investigates how educators individually and collaboratively craft their work and how this influences their daily practice, as well as exploring how professional knowledge sharing is used for collaborative job crafting.

Job crafting theory

Individuals often alter the task and relational boundaries of their job and this shapes how they understand the purpose of their work and how they define themselves as workers. Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski (2013) describe job crafting as a process of employees redefining and reimagining their job designs in personally meaningful ways. Work is meaningful if employees believe it is significant in that it serves an important purpose. Job crafting is largely informal and not found in job descriptions. Job crafting is a form of proactive behaviour in which workers initiate changes in the level of job resources and job demands to make their job more engaging, satisfying and meaningful (Demerouti and Bakker 2014). Job crafters use various job crafting techniques: changing tasks (adapting, emphasizing, redesigning), changing relationships (building, reframing, adapting) and changing perceptions (expanding, focussing, linking). Furthermore, crafters can also use their motives, strengths and passions to create a better person-job fit. A key feature of job

crafting is that employees initiate and carry out alterations to their jobs from bottom-up, which leads to more work engagement and satisfaction (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013). Reasons to engage in job crafting are manifold: to take control over certain aspects of one's work and avoid negative consequences; to enable more positive sense of self; to fulfil the basic human need for connection to others; or to work more healthily and more motivated (Demerouti and Bakker 2014). A growing knowledge base on job crafting in the academic literature has made it a concept for employers to begin using as a tool to help employees enhance the meaningfulness of their work (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013; Demerouti and Bakker 2014).

Job crafting in childcare

Relationships with others on the job provide key inputs to how employees make sense of the meaning of their work, the job and themselves in the job. Childcare workers have ample opportunity to carry out their work collaboratively; educators can craft their jobs through crafting relationships, building relationships, reframing relationships, as well as adapting relationships (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013). Relationships are central to childcare, and educators are charged with building strong relationships with each other, families, and the community to build partnerships benefiting the child and family (Brooker 2008). In childcare settings, it is common for multiple relationships to form between and among professionals (McMullen and Dixon 2009). Thus, relationships and the short-term connections that form them are key sources of meaningfulness that can be unlocked through job crafting (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013). Job crafting is an individual activity to match one's own needs and a collaborative activity by a community of practice jointly determining how to alter the work to meet their shared objective. Thus, individuals can engage in both individual and collaborative job crafting (Leana, Applebaum, and Shevchuk 2009).

In collaborative job crafting, educators work together to redesign their jobs collectively. Leana, Applebaum, and Shevchuk (2009) found that educators who were engaged in collaborative job crafting tended to perform better than those who did less collaborative crafting, especially for less experienced educators. In childcare centres, the effects of crafting by staff working collaboratively are more powerful than the effects of individual job crafting, and collaborative crafting is associated with stronger satisfaction and commitment (Leana, Applebaum, and Shevchuk 2009). It is important that staff believe in their ability to proactively change their jobs (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013). Studies on job crafting in ECEC contexts are scarce. The current study adds to this body of research.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to investigate how early childhood educators craft their work individually and collaboratively as a team. Participants included all four educators at an Infant/Toddler centre with space for 12 children, which is part of a university childcare society with 7 Infant/Toddler and 5 Preschool centres, with shared philosophy, policies and regulations across all centres of the society. The childcare was staffed with one lead educator, two assistant educators and a part-time (half-day) educator. All educators were trained in British Columbia, Canada, and held Basic ECE Certificates (requiring, for

example, 477-h course work, 425-h practicum and 500-h supervised workplace experience), and all but one educator held Infant/Toddler Certificates (requiring 250-h course work and 200-h practicum) (Early Childhood Education Registry of British Columbia 2015). The youngest educator on staff had her basic diploma but was working towards her Infant/Toddler, as well as on her Special Needs diploma. Full-time educators worked in three shifts (morning, middle and closing shift), with each shift being associated with certain tasks. Educators worked one shift for a week and then changed to the next shift for the following week. Staff had worked between 1 and 5 years at this centre. Three out of the four educators were mothers; the lead educator's two children attended another centre of the same childcare society, while the two other educators' children were adults. Only the youngest educator was not a mother herself.

Data were collected through an inductive qualitative approach through emerging methods and open-ended questions in individual interviews and inquiry circles in order to analyse, interpret and search for patterns (Creswell 2009). Two researchers were invited to the centre by the Childcare Director and the lead educator to discuss some challenges that educators experienced in their daily practice. Inquiry meetings were introduced by researchers and were new to these educators. Meetings took place during children's nap time and, even though participation was optional, all educators participated.

These meetings were aimed at bridging theory and practice and at discussing possible solutions, which educators tried to implement between meetings. All participants were encouraged to propose topics or ask questions and discussions were labelled 'discussions between critical friends in a safe environment'. The main topics discussed were experiences with forms of physical aggression expressed by children, trusting each other in the team, building trusting relationships with parents, lack of parent participation, relationships with children, attachment theory, triangle of care and orientation to care. Meetings would usually start with questions or topics proposed by educators or with educators reporting what had happened in the centre since the last meeting. If educators did not have anything to discuss researchers would propose a topic or question to be discussed. Educators participated in 16 months of first weekly then, due to educator absences and researcher commitments, bi-weekly inquiry meetings, resulting in a total of 19 meetings held during working hours (children's nap time). In addition, all four educators participated in an individual interview near the end of the inquiry meetings. Whereas inquiry meetings were geared towards gaining educators' collective understandings, interview questions were formulated to garner individual understanding. Inquiry meetings and individual interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were sent to all participants for validation. The data presented here are part of a larger study on the transition to childcare practices.

In order to acknowledge anticipated ethical issues (such as confidentiality of children or incidents discussed) arising through this study, this study was approved by the university ethics board. Furthermore, all involved parties signed informed consent forms prior to participation and were instructed that they were free to withdraw permission to participate at any time without any consequences.

The data collection resulted in 19 inquiry meeting transcripts and four individual interview transcripts collected over a 16-month period. To analyse interviews, transcripts were read as a whole, margin notes made and provisional codes formed according to questions asked (Creswell 2014). In the first coding cycle, in-vivo codes were set up to

honour participants' voices. In a second coding cycle, pattern-coding was developed for major categories from the data (Saldaña 2013). From there, categorical aggregation (Creswell 2012, 2014; Stake 1995) was used to reduce pattern codes to themes for a better understanding, in an effort to make sense of things. Inquiry meeting transcripts were coded thematically at the phrase level, relating to research questions, and information was mainly used to compare discussed theoretical concepts with educators' practices.

Findings and discussion

The intention of this study is to examine how four early childhood educators individually and collectively craft their work, and the study is an *inquiry into the dynamic nature of relationships* between educators and their workplace, as proposed by Ryan and Whitebook (2012). On a cultural level, educators work in a profession that has traditionally been underpaid, underappreciated and underrepresented in spite of the enormous importance of the work it undertakes (Shaker 2009). Andrew (2015) mentioned that educators draw on their own emotional resources in order to survive and contest the ongoing lack of value that is attributed to the work with young children. Participants of this study were aware that in society ECEC educators are not always acknowledged as early childhood professionals. What hurt their feelings was when parents using their services behaved in a way displaying this lack of professional acknowledgement:

> But sometimes, the way that we are spoken to by parents in regards to their child sometimes feels like they are kind of, staging us as: you are just watching my child. You have to take my kid because, you know, that's your job. (Emma, December 11, 2012)

Educators gain their sense of self-respect, their sense of themselves as worthwhile people by reflecting on the good they are doing for children, families and the society (Andrew 2015). Participating educators worked in the midst of the community, with many families living in the same apartment complex. They strived to be recognised as professionals (Hostettler Schärer 2018), but experiences like the one described above hindered their understanding of themselves as professionals.

In the following sections, results will be presented on the structural level and then individual level of the social context (Vygotsky 1978).

Structural level

On a structural level, the childcare centre belongs to a university childcare society, with several centres sharing philosophy, policies and regulations and offering professional development days for all educators working for the childcare society. However, educators revealed in individual interviews their individual interpretations of these standards, which sometimes led to misunderstandings and conflict between them.

> I mean [UNIVERSITY] has a policy, but then … or policy and procedures and their vision or whatever. But I don't think that's necessarily the educators'. Like obviously we are hired because we say that that's our vision. But as you work, you show that it's not necessarily your vision, right? We all have different philosophies, different visions, different … beliefs and what not. (Andrea, June 5, 2013)

This statement supports the claim that staff crafted their work individually and that they were not demonstrating ownership of the centre's philosophy as suggested by Fitzgerald and Theilheimer (2013). Educators believed they faced inflexible structures and, despite their expertise and experience, felt powerless to effect change (Dyer 2018). The quote above further shows how individual job crafting can generate conflict with what is required by employers, or between individual job crafting of co-workers. Educators reported that such conflicts were usually resolved in team meetings (happening only when needed) after opening hours with the help of the Childcare Director, while minor misunderstandings were discussed informally between educators during the day.

Typically, one lead educator and one or two assistant educators staff a childcare classroom and tasks are divided among them; classroom personnel tend to have substantial latitude in how they allocate tasks among themselves, providing fertile ground for both individual and collaborative job crafting (Leana, Applebaum, and Shevchuk 2009). For example, staff agreed that shifts and schedules should not be adjusted as they believed in the concept of fairness to all. This meant that they changed their shifts and schedules weekly. There was a morning (until after lunch), a middle and a late (closing) shift, the morning shift being the most attractive shift for educators as they get the afternoon off. This adherence to the concept of professional 'fairness' also impacted their relationships with children: while these changing shifts and schedules made it difficult for children to develop attachments to their caregivers, educators themselves declared it essential for 'fairness' that children would not show preferences for certain educators. Furthermore, educators mostly agreed that transition to care practices worked in the way they practise them, even though some educators showed doubts about their effectiveness for children in individual interviews. Even though the young assistant educator criticized her team (her individual understanding did not always reflect team understanding), she also participated in collaborative job crafting. It seemed that they had ('informally' – as they stated it was not talked about) collaboratively decided that these practices were good practice, without critically reflecting on them. Educators seemed to accept these practices as given, even though these practices were discussed thoroughly in inquiry meetings as well as individual interviews. The lead educator in her individual interview said:

> I never really talked about it [TRANSITION PRACTICES] with the rest of the staff (laughs) but it seems to work . . . (Emma, June 12, 2013)

This statement reveals that educators did not consider inquiry meetings as an opportunity for staff to discuss or reflect their practices, but as an opportunity for researchers to learn about practice. In discussing practices like transition to care, it seemed that (informal) collaborative job crafting overpowered the young assistant teacher's individual understanding in that she critiqued transition practices at the centre (during her interview) but still agreed that what they were doing worked and did not need any changes. Through socialization into a community of practice (Ryan and Whitebook 2015), these educators came to a shared understanding. On a structural level, they collaboratively crafted their job through interpreting policies flexibly when it suited them (i.e. shifts and schedules), but not when it was not convenient for them (i.e. adjusting transition practices to familial needs) (Hostettler Schärer 2018).

Individual level

On an individual level, ECEC staff often struggle to find opportunities to engage with parents, children and colleagues in ways that demonstrate professionalism (Osgood 2010). These individual relationships and how these influenced educators' job crafting will be discussed next.

Relationships with parents

As discussed elsewhere (Hostettler Schärer 2018), educators in this study presented themselves as concerned with their role as professionals. They all agreed that they wanted to be perceived and treated by parents as professionals, which was not always the case. Participants wondered if this had to do with the clientele of the childcare centre, as it was part of the university childcare society and served a mostly academic community.

The lead educator said she continuously reminded parents that everyone in the team was approachable and that all concerns would be discussed as a team. Nevertheless, most parents preferred talking to her over talking to the assistant educators when they had a concern. Educators speculated about possible reasons as to why many parents preferred to talk to the lead educator, but no clear answer was apparent in the discussions. Staff felt left out when parents ignored them and instead waited to speak to the lead educator instead of talking to staff who were available at that moment. While the young educator explained this as to do with her not having children of her own, another educator explained it as missing a connection to some parents:

> For example, with some moms I am not very comfortable talking, but I know they are comfortable talking with other teachers. And I totally respect this. So, I just leave it this way. Because there is no connection; even if I work so hard there is no connection. Which is fine. (Jamie, June 25, 2013)

Furthermore, educators deplored the lack of parental participation in their centre. Staff organized a yearly potluck dinner with families after opening hours but, other than that, there were few visits from parents during childcare hours and very limited parent participation.

> But the problem with our parents is that even if you put up documentation, they don't cross the cubby area (laughs). I don't know if you noticed, they just come to pick up the child and they go. We worked so hard over the last year and a half to invite them in: come stay with your child! (Jamie, June 25, 2013)

Educators mentioned several times during inquiry meetings that they would welcome more parental involvement in the centre. They felt most parents would be able to spend their lunch break at the centre, as it is in close proximity to the university buildings. As a relationship-building activity with parents, educators emphasised their open-door policy continuously and that parents could talk to them about anything. The lead educator specifically mentioned that the team wanted to gain parental trust and was trying to accommodate families' needs.

> We want to be able to be trusted by them and know that they can trust us. I just hope that the parents aren't shy or embarrassed to ask us any kind of questions, and that they know that they're free to come in any time if they want to sit down and talk about any concerns or questions. (Emma, June 13, 2013)

However, one educator in her individual interview revealed that one parent was taking them at their word and how this had resulted in a difficult situation for educators, as they did not have the time to answer this mother's calls and emails.

> . . . you know, we always say: call if you want or email if you want, but we never actually think that they are gonna do it (laughs) . . . so when she started doing that we were like: oh my god, why is she calling so much! He is fine! But I guess cause we offered it, so . . . I mean we have to take it, right? (Andrea, June 5, 2013)

It therefore seemed that what educators collectively reported as their professional response to family needs and flexibility of caregiving (their open-door policy) and their actual professional performance did not match. Similar findings were reported by Osgood (2010) when educators in her study distinguished between professionalism on a daily basis as opposed to pretending to be professional in 'being seen to be doing' or 'marketing a certain form of professional' during inspection to satisfy externally set demands for competence at a particular moment in time. Practitioners in her study were busy demonstrating an approximation of received forms of professionalism whilst remaining unconvinced of its appropriateness or authenticity in their work. Similarly, educators in the present study through continuously highlighting their open-door policy seemed to be demonstrating 'a certain form of professional' without actually living up to its promise. It is possible that educators were 'marketing a certain form of professional' because researchers (and often times the Childcare Director) were present in inquiry meetings, and they tried 'to satisfy externally set demands for competence' in telling us what we wanted to hear.

Ward (2018) found that practitioners' approaches and attitudes to their work with parents are highly individual and change with experience. Elfer (2015) pointed out that staff who feel understood and cared about are likely to be more responsive and attentive to individual families and children. The way staff were treated by some parents (as discussed above) and lack of parental involvement made it difficult for these educators to feel acknowledged as professionals. From their reports, it seems that some of their understanding of professionalism (and therefore their collaborative job crafting) is dependent on how their profession is viewed in society (on a cultural level), but also on how they perceive parent–educator relationships (at an individual level) in their childcare centre.

Relationships with children

The emotional demands and the emotional labour associated with the work with young children and their families are acknowledged as part of early childhood workforce professionalism (Elfer 2012). In discussing relationships with children, educators emphasized professionalism in distinguishing their professional from their personal self, and relationships with children in childcare from relationships with their families (Hostettler Schärer 2018). Manning-Morton (2006) stated that the level of emotional demands in responsive relationships can lead educators to take a defensive position, often expressed through the view that getting too close to children is not professional. This was the case for these educators; in their understanding of professionalism, relationships that were too close had to be prevented.

> When you are too attached to one child, and you are not being able to … include that relationship with all the children then I think it is unhealthy. (Andrea, November 20, 2012)

Educators struggled to call their relationship to children in their care an attachment, but they concluded that both children and educators could potentially be 'over-attached' (a term they created in inquiry meetings) in their relationships. When over-attachment happened in childcare, educators tried to hand over care for those children to other educators. When they became over-attached to a child, they stated that co-workers should point it out to them and take over care for that child. It was important for them that children could be cared for by every member of the team and not just one or two of the educators. For them, this had to do with fairness to all staff (fairness of shifts and tasks for the team) and fairness to all children in the group (no favoritism) (Hostettler Schärer 2018) and is an example of collaborative job crafting. Participants in Osgood's (2010) study also placed importance on 'detachment' and 'demarcation of private from professional self' and she concluded that these educators struggle to negotiate policy discourses and professional subjectivities in localised communities of practice. 'Nursery workers struggle to find opportunities to engage with children, colleagues and parents in ways that demonstrate professional confidence, expertise and authenticity' (Osgood 2010, 130). Facilitating emotional interactions in an optimal way for children depends on educators' *critical professional reflection* (reasoning to make meaning) about how these interactions are managed with children, families and between educators, and such reflections need to include attention to emotional experience of educators and children (Elfer 2012). From these educators' descriptions, it seemed that critical professional reflection about relationships with children was not happening between them.

Relationships with co-workers

Based on socio-cultural theory, in which learning takes place through interactions influenced by individuals, environments and culture (Vygotsky 1978), continuous learning takes place through reciprocal interactions with co-workers in the workplace.

> In collaboration, knowledge becomes a tool for professional development, and this constant social interplay between knowledge and the processes of knowing makes new understandings possible. When an educator creates his/her professional knowledge, the process occurs both collectively and individually. (Melasalmi and Husu 2016, 2)

For successful collaboration to occur, team members need a shared understanding. 'Teamwork thrived in a program that purposely built relationships among staff through opportunities for communication, the development of a shared philosophy, and the possibility of being known and feeling known by colleagues and supervisors' (Fitzgerald and Theilheimer 2013, 103). Educators therefore need time to build relationships between themselves, to share their professional knowledge, and for collaborative professional development.

Professional knowledge sharing

Through interactions with co-workers, individuals develop a shared awareness of the progress made and their goals. Participating educators reported that they resolved minor problems and misunderstandings in informal daily conversations and used irregular team

meetings after working hours to resolve bigger issues. These meetings were, however, mainly held for organisational purposes and curricula planning. Daily informal conversations were reported as the main way of communication between co-workers, supporting the claim by Melasalmi and Husu (2016) that most knowledge sharing happens through informal daily discussions. Changes in individual thinking and changes in practice might occur through shared professional knowledge; however, these learning situations often remain implicit between co-workers. To construct joint learning requires sharing one's own thinking, metacognition and the analysis of the learning process in the learning community (Melasalmi and Husu 2016).

Shared professional knowledge requires both the awareness and willingness of educators to examine their values and beliefs about teaching and care (Melasalmi and Husu 2016) and for the educators to have a shared definition of professionalism (Ward 2018). 'Shared professional knowledge can be seen as central element in successful collaboration facilitating individual and collaborative professional learning' (Melasalmi and Husu 2016, 1). Educators in the present study had little opportunity to engage in this kind of professional knowledge sharing, but they did not ask for such opportunities either. Our inquiry meetings took place during nap time (paid time), but child supervision was still necessary when children had trouble falling asleep or woke up early. This might be the reason why educators did not valuate these inquiry meetings as professional development. The participation of two researchers and the Childcare Director was not considered by these educators as mentoring by experienced and trained staff. These educators felt that these discussions were beneficial to researchers in getting access to practical examples; they did not acknowledge these discussions as opportunities for professional knowledge sharing and therefore collaborative job crafting.

Professional development

Professional development opportunities experienced by these educators were the professional development (PD) days organised by the university childcare society (on a structural level) for the entire staff of the childcare society and, as also highlighted by researchers Ryan and Whitebook (2015), were often unrelated to the practical needs of caregivers.

Recent studies suggest that ECEC professional development that involves coaching leads to more changes in educator behaviour than programs implemented without coaching – but this kind of professional development is not often available (Egert, Fukkink, and Eckhardt 2018; Ryan and Whitebook 2015). Participants in Edwards (2016) study viewed peer support, and sharing of perceptions of display rules (formal or informal rules on how to feel in certain situations) with each other, as beneficial to feeling supported in their role. Douglass et al. (2015) highlight that professional development engaging all members of an early childhood program, including the program administrator, can create an organizational culture that enables change.

Even though participants of the present study talked regularly about trusting each other as a team, becoming critical friends in inquiry and building a shared meaning of practice, educators neither considered inquiry meetings as professional development nor did they (as individual interviews revealed) develop a shared understanding of their practice. Educators kept referring to (their collaborative understanding of) policies and regulations to defend their current practices, instead of critically reflecting on their

practice of managing interactions with children, families and between co-workers. Informal daily discussions remained their main way of communication for professional development, for professional knowledge sharing, as well as for building relationships and were therefore the main source for job crafting for these educators.

Conclusion

The first question this study intended to answer was how early childhood educators individually and collaboratively craft their work so that it is meaningful and engaging for them. Early childhood educators involved in the current study are aware of the trend towards professionalization in their field and strive to act professionally. They craft their work individually (develop individual understandings) but also acquire a shared understanding of the childcare society's philosophy, policies and regulations through daily informal discussions between staff, in what can be described as collaborative job crafting. Childcare practices such as transitions to childcare, and weekly changing shifts and schedules (fairness to all staff) are examples of collaboratively crafted understandings. If individual understandings and collaboratively crafted understandings do not match, conflicts arise and are mostly resolved through informal discussions. There is, however, no formally allocated time to discuss and/or reflect on individual or collective understandings.

The second question of this investigation was how these educators share their professional knowledge. As early childhood professionals, these educators are 'marketing a certain form of professionalism' that they collaboratively agreed on, manifested through trying to build relationships with parents (as a structural expectation) and through preventing relationships that are too close to children. Professional developments experienced by these educators are conferences organized by the childcare society for all staff, covering topics chosen by the society. Professional knowledge sharing is happening in informal daily discussions only. Taken together, daily informal discussions between staff are the main way for these educators to collaboratively craft their work and professional understandings.

The final question this study intended to answer was whether job crafting can be used to improve job satisfaction and collaborative work in ECEC. Most interestingly, these educators did not consider inquiry meetings that they attended for 16 months as professional development or as offering the possibility for professional reflection. They were readily telling us about their pedagogical practice but did not see any necessity to change or adjust these practices. Therefore, first and foremost, these educators need an understanding that professionalization means ongoing professional development, professional reflection, professional knowledge-sharing and continuous training. Educators would need to acknowledge continuous professional development and reflective practice as an entitlement, as it is legitimate and necessary if change in professional practice is to be facilitated and sustained (Elfer 2012; Elfer and Dearnley 2007; Hostettler Schärer 2018). 'If we expect teachers who perform their work in highly interdependent teams to change and improve their teaching practices, we must provide professional development in ways that enable teaching teams, supervisors, and co-workers to learn together and implement change collaboratively' (Douglass et al. 2015, 10). They further need enabling working conditions, presence of mentors or coaches and paid hours for non-contact time to facilitate professional reflections in reference groups (Vandenbroeck et al. 2016). To

improve working conditions and professionalization, and therefore making educators' jobs more meaningful and satisfying, organizations (like childcare societies) should start promoting social learning processes among professionals initiated by job holders themselves (bottom-up) and combine them with their approaches (Demerouti and Bakker 2014; Havnes 2018; Fitzgerald and Theilheimer 2013; Jensen and Iannone 2018), which would help employees to enhance the meaningfulness that they experience in their work (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013). The study presented here supports the claim by Leana, Applebaum, and Shevchuk (2009) that collaborative job crafting can be used for professional development and to enhance job satisfaction. Ideally, collaborative job crafting includes all members of a classroom team. As this study highlights, the concept of collaborative job crafting must be made explicit to participants. Educators need paid time to discuss and reflect their practices and to share their professional knowledge, ideally with the help of mentors and coaches. Together they can discuss their individual understandings and come to a shared understanding of good practice for themselves, their relationships and their centre, leading, as Leana, Applebaum, and Shevchuk (2009) point out, to better performance, stronger satisfaction and greater commitment.

As these results are based on a case study, their generalisation is limited. However, these results add to the limited research on job crafting in ECEC contexts in showing how structural workplace elements interact with staff agency (Ryan and Whitebook 2012) and identify components essential for improved job performance. For sustainable professional development of ECEC educators, this study pleads to incorporate opportunities for explicit collaborative job crafting with *all members of staff*, during *paid* time, labelled as *on-going professional development*. For collaborative professional learning to be successful (Melasalmi and Husu 2016), educators need time to co-construct across and within ECEC systems (Jensen and Iannone 2018). It is important that educators can demonstrate ownership of the centre's philosophy, policies and regulations by participating in their creation (Fitzgerald and Theilheimer 2013), increasing educators' confidence in their role and application of theory into their practice (Dyer 2018). Social learning (Jensen and Iannone 2018) and the management of feelings (Colley 2006) should be targeted to improve meaningfulness (Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski 2013) of educators' jobs. Job crafting, however, goes beyond educators' professional development. Educators might be more engaged and satisfied in their jobs if educators' needs, beliefs and practices, as well as the organisations' policies and regulations can be discussed and reflected on – in collaborative job crafting – for educators to feel the power to effect change (Berg et al. 2013, Dyer 2018) and to take on ownership (Fitzgerald and Theilheimer 2013) for professional development and professional knowledge sharing.

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