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Shall we play us and them or all together now? Leadership opportunities for cohesiveness and unity within a fractured Western Australian Early Childhood Education Sector

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SHALL WE PLAY US AND THEM OR ALL TOGETHER NOW?

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR COHESIVENESS AND UNITY WITHIN A FRACTURED WESTERN AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SECTOR

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Abstract

This paper presents the qualitative and quantitative findings of a research project that examines the perceptions and expectations held by pre-service teachers regarding the Childcare sector. It presents the experience based position of a group of pre-service teachers both before and after their exposure to practice within Childcare following a ten week practicum.

It offers a contribution to the evolving body of research relevant to a recent Government decision that requires the employment of qualified teachers in all Childcare Services by 2014. This decision came about as a response to the 2006 report by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Starting Strong II*, which stated the need for Australia to improve consistency and quality in their early years education sector.

A mixed methods approach was employed. Thirty students in their third year of a four year teaching degree at The University of Notre Dame, Australia were surveyed and interviewed before and after embarking on a ten week practicum within the Childcare sector. The data gathered in this study provides a platform for the papers comparative discussion on their pre and post perceptions and expectations of the Childcare sector. Both data sets reveal interesting findings in relation to the impact of exposure to Childcare practice on pre-service teacher's perceptions of Childcare. The qualitative data also sheds lights on the way in which their perspectives changed, and the reasons for the changes.

A key finding was the sense of separation that the pre-service teachers felt. As educators that would soon be qualified teachers, they experienced a distinct sense of being outsiders within Childcare. They felt that the policy requiring the employment of a qualified teacher within Childcare was resented by those who have devoted their careers to the Childcare sector to date. This resentment manifested itself in many varied ways, some more negative than others. The overwhelming feeling that the resentment was not being managed well by leaders within the sector was also keenly felt. This leads us to the inevitable question of how greater cohesiveness and unity can be brought to a Childcare sector that includes qualified teachers. Such cohesiveness is essential for harmony within individual centres. However, more importantly, such harmony is essential in the lives of the young children whom they serve.

Keywords: Childcare, Education, Teachers, Pre-service, Practicum, Leadership, Change management.

1 THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Much existing research advocates for high quality early learning experiences for young children from birth (McCain, Mustard & Shanke, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Tayler, 2012). Children who are placed in quality education and care settings in the early years before compulsory school settings have improved opportunities for success in later learning (OECD, 2006; Tayler, 2012). In Australia, policy measures to promote such quality are contained within the *National Quality Framework (NQF)*. As a policy document, it is an attempt to act on such international research evidence to improve quality in early years settings, especially, within full day care centres.

Historically, the education and care of children in Australia has been dichotomous. Childcare was viewed as offering care for children, as opposed to education, and this perceptual division existed until the *NQF*

was enacted in 2009 (Brennan, 2009 in Bowes & Grace, 2009). The background to the *NQF* began with the 2006 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) paper, *Starting Strong II*. It established that Australia was far behind in relation to investment in the early years when compared to other countries of comparable economic status. This lack of investment in the early years was discussed as contributing to a relatively poor educational output by the country in general. This relationship between early investment and long term output, and therefore, long term gains for society is an internationally evidenced one (Currie, 2009; Heckman, 2007). The OECD's report strongly identified the need for the Australian Government to establish a cohesive and unified approach toward the early years and develop a system where education and care were integrated rather than segregated.

The Australian Government's action to achieve this cohesiveness in the unification of education and care was set down in their paper, *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009). The central premise of this strategy was to draw on international research especially that which was presented in the OECD's *Starting Strong II* (2006), to set down the Government's commitment to raising quality in settings involving children aged birth to 8 years. The strategy recognised the very real opportunity that exists within the Childcare sector to identify development concerns early and therefore minimise the impact of risk factors (COAG, 2009). The strategy explicitly states that Australia must move forward to improve holistic development for young children in order to improve transition to school and lifelong educational, employment, health and wellbeing outcomes (COAG, 2009).

The *NQF* (2011) was born from the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (2009). The framework identifies the need for streamlined regulatory arrangements which includes quality measure, for children aged from birth to eight years of age (COAG, 2009). This framework comprises four initiatives, namely: a national legislative framework, a national quality standard (including the *Early Years Learning Framework*), a national quality rating and assessment process and a new national body called Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The *National Quality Standard (NQS)* (ACECQA, 2013) sets down measurable standards of quality that services which provide for children age 0-5 years, are required to meet. The Standard is built on a foundation of international research and as noted in *The Guide to the National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2013), and is designed to develop a better understanding of quality for both services and the families they serve. The seven Standards comprise elements of both process and structural interpretations of quality, as suggested within empirical research which provides a strong evidence base for the measures (Ishimine, Tayler & Bennett, 2010; Ramey & Ramey, 2006; Tayler, 2009).

The *NQF* includes *The Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming (EYLF)* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). This framework provides a policy agenda for educators working with children aged birth to age 5 and through the transition to school. As a national policy, this document promotes practical outcomes, principles and practices for a range of early childhood contexts. The document advocates that children have *agency and voice* and that educators should view the child holistically.

In advocating holistic education, the *EYLF* draws upon the myriad of international research that demonstrates that children who experience more holistic well-being are more effective learners, healthier people who invest more in relationships, communities and the sustainability of the planet (Gordon, O'Toole & Whitman, 2008). The *EYLF* emphasises the role of the educator in providing children with opportunities to develop holistically through play, to learn through play, to enjoy their childhood and to be provided with continuity in their learning.

The *Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act* (2012a) was enacted in Western Australian in 2012. This Act made important changes to previous legislation. It set down the role of services in providing for both the education and care of children. This educational role for Childcare is clearly articulated within its objectives. Of particular note, The *Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act* (2012a) included the procedure for being audited against the *NQS* (ACECQA, 2013) and the responsibility of the regulatory body, ACECQA, in governing this process.

Western Australia has therefore laid down a dramatic change in policy that seeks to oversee early childhood services moving from single-purpose facilities addressing care, health or education to unified services that address holistic child development through cohesive education and care. In 2012, the Western Australian Education Department established the Office for Early Childhood and Development. This office holds responsibility for 0-3 years olds in long day care centres, located on school sites, and is a further significant move towards unifying education and care at a policy level.

These policy changes, have major implications for both education and care sectors within Western Australia. The change is dramatic. Where the aim of the school has historically been education, and the aim of the Childcare service has been simply to care they are both now expected to address the integration of these principles within their respective services (School Education Amendment Bill, 2012b).

Other states within Australia have promoted integrated services for many years (Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010). The policy context of such integration, however, is brand new within Western Australia, as services not only attempt to integrate education and care sectors, but also comply with standards of quality within their service. A unique aspect to the Western Australian context is that within the *NQF* (COAG, 2009) educators in the Childcare sector are responsible for implementing the *EYLF*. As the *EYLF* advocates for the integration of education and care across 0-5 year old settings, educators themselves are charged with the unification of the sector.

2 PROJECT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Mixed Methods

The approach taken for this study was primarily mixed-methods research in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches were utilised to explore different aspects of a phenomenon to ascertain the most comprehensive data. In this study, the researchers simultaneously collected both quantitative and qualitative data, compared the results and subsequently used those findings to ascertain authentic validation of all collected data. The results were recorded under qualitative themes and the statistical trends from the quantitative data were used to support these themes.

2.1.1 Qualitative Methods

“Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter” (Creswell, 2013, p.15). Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. In qualitative research the researcher “relies on the views of the participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words from participants and describes and analyses these words for themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 39). Data for this research study were collected through in-depth interviews. The researchers then attempted to identify and describe aspects of each individual’s perceptions and reactions to his/her experience in some detail (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011).

According to Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2011), the advantages of an interview, over a questionnaire or survey, are that open-ended questions, those requiring a response of some length, can be used with greater confidence. It also provides the researchers with the opportunity to pose particular questions of special interest or value that can be pursued in depth, follow-up questions can be asked, and responses that might be unclear can be further explored.

2.1.1.1 Interviews

In order to obtain detailed information, the researchers conducted qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with the participating pre-service teachers prior to the start of the Childcare practicum experience, and again after completion of the 10 week Childcare practicum experience. These questions were framed in an open-ended format to enhance the richness of data collected. To maximize the consistency of responses to the individual interview questions, all participants were asked the same questions and, as far as possible, similar wording was used with each of these participants. However, as the questions were framed in an open-ended format, the interviewees had a great deal of freedom in the way in which they responded. In qualitative interviewing, the researcher has an interest in the interviewee’s point of view and the interviewee’s own perspective as this provides insight into what he/she sees as relevant and important (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011). This also provided the opportunity for other questions to emerge from the interviewees and/or from the researcher during these sessions.

2.1.2 Quantitative Methods

In quantitative research, the researcher “decides what to study, asks specific, narrow questions, collects numeric data from participants and analyses these numbers using statistics” (Creswell, 2013, p. 39). Survey research falls under the category of descriptive research as it is designed to depict people, situations and events as they exist and is typically non-experimental (Charles & Mertler, 2010; Mertens, 2014). The main advantages of survey research include: the guaranteed anonymity of the participants;

affordability; ease of analysis; administration to many people; collection of large amount of data; and the uniformity of questions to each respondent (Charles & Mertler, 2010; Mertens, 2014).

According to Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2011), the difficulties involved in survey-based research are mainly threefold: (1) ensuring that the questions to be answered are clear and not misleading; (2) getting respondents to answer questions thoughtfully and honestly; and (3) ensuring that a sufficient number of the questionnaires are completed and returned so that meaningful analyses can be undertaken. The researchers addressed these criteria by discussing and explaining the survey with the participants prior to them completing the survey, as well as by providing participants with enough time to comprehensively and accurately complete the survey.

This research project required a pretest–post-test comparison design, with data collected from all participants prior to the start of the Childcare practicum experience, and again after completion of the 10 week Childcare practicum experience. This design approach enables an accurate comparison of results and for the researchers to determine if/how pre-service teacher's perceptions and expectations of the Childcare sector changed after completing a Childcare practicum experience.

2.1.2.1 Pre-service Teacher Survey

The Pre-service Teacher Survey used for this research was created to investigate the perceptions and expectations held by pre-service teachers within the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education and Care: 0-8yrs) course regarding the Childcare sector. The Pre-service Teacher Survey includes 22 statements about the Childcare sector. The participants specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for each of the statements. The ratings indicate the intensity of the participant's feelings for a given item. The pre-service teachers participating in this study completed the 22-item rating scale prior to the start of the Childcare practicum experience, and again after completion of the 10 week Childcare practicum experience.

2.3 Data analysis

Once survey data were collected from participants, the next step was to input the data on the computer, conduct appropriate statistical analyses and interpret the data. Data were coded by assigning a number for each response choice prior to entering the responses into Excel to perform statistical analyses and create frequency and percentage graphs. These statistics were then used for comparison with the interview data.

After transcribing the interviews, the data were coded into identified categories or themes based on patterns and ideas that emerged from the interview responses (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). After labelling observed patterns and sorting, comparing and contrasting, a system for classification emerged. The researchers thus aimed to create new understandings of a situation by exploring and interpreting complex data from the interviews and surveys. The themes were integrated into a narrative description of the phenomenon containing direct quotations from interview statements (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011). These illustrative data provided a sense of reality, describing exactly what the informant felt and perceived before and after their practicum experiences.

In order to ensure that the reliability and validity of this study were effectively addressed and that the researchers were not being misinformed, multiple procedures were used to check the perceptions of the participants throughout this project. By using multiple sources of data collection, such as surveys and interviews, conclusions can be supported and validity in the research is thereby enhanced. This method of checking is referred to as *triangulation* (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, in this study, survey research was used to obtain a comprehensive view to determine if pre-service teacher's perceptions and expectations of the Childcare sector changed after completing a Childcare practicum experience. The researchers also interviewed the participating pre-service teachers in order to ascertain multiple perspectives how pre-service teachers felt before and after completing a Childcare practicum experience. The researcher then compared the results and used those findings to ascertain that they validated one another.

3 SHARED POLICY GOALS WITHIN EDUCATION AND CARE

The Australian Government's vision to unite education and care was made explicit in their paper, *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (2009). This strategy acknowledged the important opportunity that exists in settings involving children aged birth to 8 years to address development concerns early and therefore minimise the impact of risk factors (COAG, 2009).

As early childhood education and care (ECEC) includes children until the age of 8 years, this is a joint shared policy between Childcare and schools in WA.

Other shared policies include the *NQS* and the *EYLF*. The *NQS* has been established under an applied law system comprising the National Law and National Regulations and applies to most long day care, family day care, outside schools hours care and preschools and/or kindergartens in Australia. In November 2013, the Minister for Education, the Hon Peter Collier, informed all principals that early childhood programs to Year 2 in Western Australian schools will be required to meet the *NQS* by 2015. Western Australia's approach to implementing the *NQS* in schools has been jointly developed by the Departments of Education and Education Services, in consultation with the Catholic and Independent school sectors.

Policies relating to early childhood are generally covered in the areas of social or public policy. This policy area covers a broad range of government issues including welfare, education and health. Situating early childhood education and care within the productivity agenda is a significant consideration in the Australian policy framework. A productivity agenda positions children for their potential as future citizens and aims to develop dispositions, skills and culture that support the long-term aspirations of the nation (Waniganayake et al., 2012). The policy requirement for Childcare services to employ a qualified early childhood teacher is a large part of the plan for unification and integration in the sector.

4 DIVISION IN PRACTICE WITHIN EDUCATION AND CARE

Despite these shared policy goals, great division is evident within the practice. Many participants of this research project felt unwelcome within Childcare.

4.1 Feeling Under Threat

The data recoded qualitatively records this as linked to feelings of displacement or threat on the part of Childcare workers.

'They didn't want us there, they don't like the idea of teachers in Childcare and think it is an unnecessary imposition'

The roots of this appear to be rooted in the different training and qualification pathways available to Childcare workers versus Teachers.

'She didn't like that I would have a degree and she never would. Who can she blame for that? Me, apparently!'

'I think they had a hang up about the degree and went out of their way to belittle it.'

4.2 Levels of Training as a Source of Dissention

This perception on the part of the pre-service teachers that Childcare workers harbour a resentment of their qualification status raises some interesting questions. The first is what is the correct level of training and education for an educator in a unified system? Is a one year qualification enough for what is not only a complicated job but is also an incredibly important job (Currie, 2009; Heckman, 2007).

The feeling of resentment on the part of educators in Childcare may well be justified. After all, few mediums exist for them to up-skill to degree level. The lack of a pathway for Childcare workers to qualify as teachers is inequitable. Many pre-service teachers acknowledged their skills;

'The girls I was with were very committed and took it very seriously, were always trying to learn more and were totally conscientious about the education they gave. It's easy to forget that they have lots of experience so they are also learning as

they go, especially if they stop and think and reflect and try to find out more and more'

4.3 Insights into the effectiveness of the policy as a integrating influence for the unification of education and care within the sector.

Furthermore, it raises the question of whether the policy that requires the employment of a teacher within Childcare is actually achieving its stated goal of unifying and integrating the sectors. 94% of the pre-service teachers who took part in this study were unable to disagree with the need for teachers in Childcare yet 94% also expressed reluctance to work as teachers in Childcare. Childcare workers on the other hand emerge as interested in further qualification to raise both practice and status within their sector.

'She was always asking about what we covered in uni, she was really interested and just wanted as much information as she could get to do as good a job as she could'.

'I think Educators in Childcare work as hard, actually they work a lot harder than Educators in schools. It is really wrong that they get less recognition for that.'

The feelings expressed by many participants that they were powerless to enact change in the face of resentment and belittlement is upheld by existing research on the topic. Qualifications are no currency for change (Garrock & Morrissey, 2013). This adds further weight to the query on whether the requirement to have a teacher employed within Childcare is actually achieving its goal. Garrock and Morrissey's paper discussed some of the challenges associated with the role of educational leaders in Childcare and found that while these teachers successfully made changes within their rooms, they felt limited in their abilities to make changes in other educator's rooms. Barriers to leadership included lack of time and a perception that their teacher qualifications 'did not buy authority' (2013).

4.4 Issues of Status, Pay and Conditions as Barriers to Unification

A previous paper published from this study highlighted the issues of status, pay and conditions as a divisive force within the education and care sector because they are so tightly bound up within educators' identity and self-concept (O'Connor, McGunnigle, Treasure & Davie, 2014). It is important to revisit it here as it is also a source of division because it causes resentment on the part of Childcare workers and acts as a barrier for teachers considering the employment opportunities for teachers in Childcare.

'They get paid less, they get less holidays, the days are longer, no thanks.

This inequity is largely due to the variance in training structures. It is widely understood that a one year training course will naturally bring different employment pay, status and conditions to a four year one.

'I think teachers in schools have a higher status and are more respected in general because they have a degree and teaching is a profession and everyone knows what it is whereas Childcare is less defined and the training requires less of a commitment and it's also less competitive to get on the training in the first place. That kind of makes sense I suppose'

There is, indeed, some sense in that. However, the sense stops when we consider the importance of the work that educators perform at every level within Childcare. The Early Years are the most pivotal years of life (Unesco and Unicef, 2012). This is widely accepted by the international research community and forms the basis of evidence based policy making around the world. It was also, acknowledged by the participants of this study.

'It's also developmentally a very important time in children's lives and they do an amazing job at balancing the care and educational needs. It's a tough job, tougher age range and tougher, longer hours. I think that they should get more

recognition for what they do, more appreciation and definitely more status, people have no idea how hard they work and how much they achieve,'

5 OPPORTUNITIES FOR COHESIVENESS REQUIRE SECTORAL LEADERSHIP

Opportunities for leaders to respond proactively to these issues and bring greater unity and cohesiveness into the sector are plentiful. It is clear that pathway training and education courses are needed for Childcare workers to become degree qualified within their own field. Degree course and honours degree courses that focus on care and education from birth to five and birth to six are running successfully internationally (European Commission, 2013). Leadership in policy is required to establish greater supports to allow Childcare workers to access such courses while remaining in the sector. Leadership is also needed within Western Australia's universities to allow for flexible pathways to qualification without compromising the quality of the all-important face-to-face delivery so important within undergraduate qualification for social professions such as education.

The accompanying pay and working conditions issues will need to be revised to match rising qualifications. It is important to address the cynical viewpoint that it is this issue which prevents the development of an adequate policy framework for up-skilling Childcare workers. The question of the original impetus for a unified sector remains. The policy requiring a teacher in Childcare is not fulfilling its goal to integrate education and care in Western Australia. This is not because it is a poor policy, it is an excellent policy but it is under developed, under supported and requires greater leadership from a policy level to achieve its goal of integration. This leadership needs to address integration as stemming from the educators themselves. Teachers and Childcare workers both perform education and care duties within Childcare. The integration must come from within the profession. To achieve this, greater balance must be brought to bear on the qualifications of all educators in early childhood education and care. From equitable qualifications, quality will flow; as must practicalities such as pay, conditions and status.

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