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Who am I in the eyes of the world? A comparative study of Pre-Service Teachers' perceptions of Early Childhood Educators' professional status in their community. Australian and American perspectives

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WHO AM I IN THE EYES OF THE WORLD?
**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS’
PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS’
PROFESSIONAL STATUS IN THEIR COMMUNITY.**
AUSTRALIAN AND AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This research provides an insight into the perceptions held by pre-service teachers on the professional status of early childhood educators in their community. As a comparative study, it presents results from both Australian and American perspectives.

It is the first research of its kind in studying pre-service teachers’ perceptions of ECEC teacher’s status in relation to the Australian context or in comparing perspectives from Australia and the USA.

The paper illuminates on two main points. It presents findings on multiple level pre-service teachers’ perceptions of early childhood educators’ professional status in their community and also examines how the perceptions gathered from pre-service teachers in Australia compare to those from America, opening the field for cultural and political analysis and discourse.

This study’s significance is deepened within the Australian political landscape as it comes at a time when the Early Childhood Education and Care sector has implemented a new quality framework which prioritises teaching qualifications. The comparative aspect of the study thereby provides rich opportunity for cross cultural analysis in relation to how Early Childhood Educators are viewed within their own broader educational community membership.

Keywords: Teachers, Pre-Service Teachers, Professional Status, Community, Australian and American Comparisons.

1 INTRODUCTION

Professions are associated with hard work, dedication and determination. Research into perceptions of teaching as a profession show that 91% of respondents believed that teaching is a profession. When asked to define the concept of profession, the two dominant responses included 44% responding that passion is the key determinant of the term and 39% responding that specific skills underlies the definition of a profession.(Papakonstantinou, Martinez, & Desiderio, 2010). With professional labelling comes professional status. What does that term mean in relation to teachers and what are their perceptions of it? This paper looks at the perceptions of pre-service teachers in America and Australia and showcases their views, it also looks at their perceptions of Early Childhood Teachers as a distinct grouping within their profession.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research project was carried out using a quantitative approach which sought to uncover the perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers on their professional status. Pre-Service Teachers in both America and Australia participated allowing for comparisons on the differences or similarities that exist within perceptions of Teacher's professional status, between the American and Australian cohorts.

A quantitative approach involved the use of a Likert Scale questionnaire. Quantitative approaches involve the collection of information represented as numerical data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) and this method was well suited to this study as it allowed a relatively large sample of pre-service teachers' perceptions to be garnered. The use of a Likert scale that contains pre-determined statements is a common quantitative tool as it allows for a systematic approach to data collection (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The Likert scale utilised in this research contained twenty items and participants rated their response to the item on a scale of one to five. The scale ran from strongly disagree indicated by a '1' to strongly agree indicated by a '5'. As recommended within best practice, the Likert scale questionnaire was trialled and adjusted to ensure maximum clarity and minimum ambiguity (Neuman 2011).

Participants for this research investigation were pre-service teachers, in the final year of their education degree. The pre-service teachers were selected from one university in Australia and one university in America, to allow for a comparative study. Participants were invited to participate during one of their units of study that involved a mix of early childhood, primary/elementary and secondary degree pre-service teachers. Participants were provided with consent forms and the opportunity to complete the Likert scale. A total of 145 pre-service teachers availed of the invitation to participate, across the two universities/two countries.

Data analysis produced statistics. The analysed data was recorded within frequency and percentage graphs to distinguish between the Australian and American perceptions.

This paper presents key findings including how pre-service teachers define Professional Status and the role of trust within perceptions of professional status. In addition, it presents findings relating to their motivations to enter the profession at different levels (to work with different age groups from Early Childhood through to Secondary) and their collective views on the differentiations that they perceive within the professional status allocated to them as a result of this choice.

3 DEFINITIONS OF PROFESSIONAL STATUS. PERCEPTIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE TERM PROFESSIONAL STATUS

Status is position, importance or standing in society. The status of teachers and the status of teaching are not the same. A high professional status means having the respect of stakeholders and the public at large. It is perceived as being in a position of trust and accountability. Occupational status comes from public prestige or the relative position of the occupation, occupational status which is the category that the occupation falls into and occupational esteem which is the regard held by the general public for the occupation (Hargreaves et al., 2006).

Barriers to teacher's professional status include the number of teachers that are employed, qualifications required, salaries paid, lack of mystique as everyone has been to school as a pupil, lack of entry control to the profession, gender imbalance and number of women in teaching (Hargreaves et al., 2006). A condition known as status panic was identified in the USA in the context of teacher and status anxiety; indicating the importance of professional status among teachers as a prime concern.

A UK study found that 90% teachers who responded rated teaching as medium to low on a 5 point scale of status occupations. Government initiatives to raise the profile of teachers in the UK were associated with the introduction of performance management, new standards for qualifications, and the creation of a career structure. Such policies can be seen as both professionalisation of teaching and removing teachers' autonomy.(Hargreaves et al., 2006). This may prove counterproductive within the longer term as recent research shows that target setting management can get in the way of teachers performing their role. (Fuller et al., 2013).

The teaching profession struggles to identify itself in relation to other professions. Most professions are subject to scrutiny and regulations. Professional organisations oversee doctors and lawyers. Teachers are similarly under the scrutiny of government, the profession, the media as well as parents, school management and students (Fuller et al., 2013). The main forces behind status are largely considered to be power, money and fame or reputation. Secondary drivers are training, skill, expertise

and social influence. Teachers are more aligned to the secondary drivers of status, but these do not translate to the primary drivers (Fuller et al., 2013). The participants of this study certainly align more to the secondary drivers with the majority identifying the main component of professional status to be that of trust and respect within the community (77%). The second highest component (59%) was that of making a difference in the world.

4 PROFESSIONAL STATUS, TRUST AND EXEMPLARS OF MORALITY

The view that teachers are figures of trust within their community is an established one (Wang & Bird, 2011). It is also one which has far reaching effects in the enhancement of children's development within education; both within social and academic outcomes (Lerikkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, & Nurmi, 2013). Perceptions around the levels of trust they hold also effects teacher's wellbeing and improves their practice. Where trust exists between parents and their child's teacher, both feel valued and engaged within a partnership focused on the child's educational journey (Lerikkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, & Nurmi, 2013); an outcome which ultimately benefits all parties. It is in our interest then that teacher's retain their traditional role as a figure of trust. Dealing with moral issues is an important part of a teacher's role. The values held by families can be wide and varied. A study (Pantić & Wubbels, 2012) into how teachers perceived their moral role was conducted for the purposes of teacher development in this area. The findings show that Teachers display moral views through their actions in the classroom, for example, in what they pay attention to and their views when talking to students. In the main, Teachers promote critical thinking and independence from a moral perspective amongst students and have the view that teachers should model good conduct.

"Since our profession is a public profession, we are in any case constantly under the eyes of environment, parents, our pupils...What we do, how we dress. I think we need to take care in private life and always bear in mind that we are a moral model" (Pantić & Wubbels, 2012)

Within this study, Pre-Service Teachers in both the USA and Australia agreed that they perceive teacher's to be held in high regard as figures of trust. This was valued by the participants of the study with the majority in both countries citing that this professional status was important to them. The value placed on this was higher among American participants with 87% defining it as important compared to 65% of their Australian counterparts. However, in drilling down deeper into what Pre-Service teachers consider the defining feature of professional status, 77% of participants across both countries cited having the respect of the community.

5. PROFESSIONAL STATUS AS A CAREER MOTIVATOR FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS.

The existing literature of why Secondary Teachers choose their profession indicates a circuitous that belies a potential lack of strong motivation for the profession. In Roness & Smith's 2009 study they report that the main path to being a secondary teacher is predominantly through post graduate routes. A Norwegian study looking at the motivation of pre-service secondary teachers within post graduate courses found that 25% were uncertain about becoming teachers and chose to complete the course to increase their options in the job market. Of those that had a stronger sense of motivation for the teaching profession, the reasons included a mixture of: having been influenced by others, their own school experiences and work experience that awakened a vocation. Roness & Smith's 2009 study reported that motivations were career related, wanting a rewarding, stable and challenging career and their interest in their specific subject and desire to be immersed within it.

Undergraduate pre-service teachers differ from postgraduates because undergraduates choose teaching as a first choice career. Post graduate students reported wanting to have more options in the job market as reasons for completing their course with only 11% reporting that they had always

wanted to be a teacher. Some post graduate students use the course as a stepping stone to another career such as educational psychology or further studies (Roness & Smith 2009).

However, a more recent study shows a more positive view stating that career switchers who enter a graduate diploma in secondary education tend to be more mature, professional and committed to their choice of teaching as a career. The motivations put forward by the participants of the 2012 Watt et al. study also include predominantly intrinsic drivers such as: engaging in a career, working with children, job security, positive influence on society and the opportunity to balance career with life (Watt et al., 2012)

Both Early Childhood and Primary Teachers are predominantly motivated by the desire to work with children and make a difference in their lives. However, Watt et al's study also found that ECE teachers have stronger beliefs in developmentally appropriate practices than teachers working with older age groups (2012). Previous research also shows that Pedagogical choices in terms of pedagogical instinct also play a role in whether a potential teacher chooses Early Childhood or Primary. Early Childhood pre-Service Teachers have more child-centred beliefs and are more in favour of play based and developmentally appropriate practices whereas primary Pre-Service teachers look forward to teacher directed lessons and activities. Early childhood students expressed a preference for a job in Kindy or pre-Kindy rather than in early primary possibly distancing themselves from pedagogies that don't align with their natural teaching instincts (File & Gullo, 2002)

The participants of this study were asked if they considered professional status when choosing whether to teach at an Early Childhood, Primary or Secondary level. The data shows that this was considered by a significant minority with 27% of the American participants and 25% of the Australian participants agreeing that this forms part of their decision making process.

6. PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS VIEWS ON THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF TEACHERS ACROSS THE EDUCATIONAL AGE RANGES.

In a UK study (Hargreaves et al., 2006) on teacher status it was found that men and women from the general public (n=1288) had different opinions about the status of primary and secondary teachers. Men were significantly more likely to rate secondary teachers as being of higher status while women were more likely to report no difference. When asked reasons for their answers, primary status was valued by women for its influence on children's lives, while secondary status was valued by both groups due to the level of qualifications and knowledge required, the workload involved and salary paid. These perceived differences between primary and secondary teachers are worthy of note because they may indicate lack of public awareness that the same qualifications are required to be a primary or a secondary teacher, and of primary teachers' equivalent workloads and salaries.

This difference in value placed on Teachers depending on the age range they teach has come through in other studies. Maloney (2010) reported that Early Childhood teachers have had to battle for recognition of their professionalism and in general, both historically and currently, they are not afforded the same professional respect as their colleagues who teach older age ranges.

The participants of this study do not agree. Participants across the age ranges and across both countries refused to agree that Primary and Secondary education was more important (92%). Similar large majorities (91% in Australia and 80% in America) did not agree that Early Childhood Teachers were less knowledgeable than their Primary or Secondary counterparts. Similarly both country's participants supported the statement that in their view, Early Childhood Teachers make the overall greatest contribution to a children's education, in the case of both countries minorities disagreed (26% in Australia and 31% in America). Significant majorities in both countries also dismissed the concept that Early Childhood is somehow an easy option within the teaching profession with only 18% of Australian participants and 7% of American participants agreeing with this sentiment. Both cohorts also stated clearly that they did not agree that Secondary Teachers made the greatest contribution to a child's learning with only 9% of Australian participants and 4% of American participants thinking this.

However, the participants, while supportive of both the importance of Early Childhood Teacher's knowledge and importance, were also aware that within general society, the professional status allocated to Early Childhood Teachers is less than that allocated to their colleagues who teach higher age ranges. Only 16% of Australian participants and 25% of American participants disagreed with this statement. There was also strong support among participants that they would like to see this

changing. 63% of Australian participants and 70% of American participants agreed that this disparity needs to change.

5 CONCLUSION

Recent studies place Early Childhood Education at the heart of both academic and social outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2012). These are measurable throughout life and impact not just on individual outcomes but collective outcomes that positively affect societies and economies (Schweinhart et al, 2005). Despite this, society views the Early Childhood Teacher as an inferior professional when compared to other teachers (Hargreaves et al, 2006; Maloney 2010). This study looked at the perception of Pre-Service Teachers across all age delineated age ranges (Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary) and two countries (Australia and America). The message they relate through their responses is clear and comparably aligned. They collectively can see the value their Early Childhood colleagues hold, they can see equivalence in skill and knowledge. They can also see at least equivalence in importance and workload. However, they agree that the allocated status is less and that this is an injustice and needs to change.

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