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Teachers who care and carers who educate. Professional status issues and differences in pay and conditions are resulting in a tale of division within our Early Childhood Community

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TEACHERS WHO CARE AND CARERS WHO EDUCATE?

Professional status issues and difference in pay and conditions are resulting in a tale of division within our Early Childhood Community.

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a research project that investigated the views of a group of pre-service teachers both before and after their exposure to practice within professional Childcare. 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.

A key finding of the study was that there is currently great division within the Western Australian Early Childhood Education sector. This division has arisen following a recent Government policy decision that requires qualified teachers to be employed in Childcare Services by 2014. However, the current lead educators within these care based settings are resentful of the implication that qualified teachers are needed to improve consistency and quality in the early years. This resentment coupled with the lower levels of pay and conditions within Childcare settings in comparison to schools serves to make Childcare an unattractive prospect for qualified teachers. However, when the reasons for the resentment are explored, they expose an inequity of status that challenges the identity of those on both sides of the divide within what should be a community... a community of educators with the shared goal of supporting the holistic education of Western Australia's youngest children.

This paper makes a necessary contribution to the current research context where research on perspectives of teacher-educators within Childcare is limited. It is particularly pertinent in the context of the implementation of the policy requiring a qualified teacher to be employed within Childcare settings from 2014 onwards. The central message of the research is that this community needs healing and support in order to move beyond the power struggle to be free to educate children within their related and equally important spheres of expertise.

Keywords: Community, Educare, Childcare, Education, Teachers, Pre-service, Status.

1 THE POLICY CONTEXT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE WITHIN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN

The level of quality within early care and education experiences for young children impacts from birth (McCain, Mustard & Shanke, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Tayler, 2012). Children who experience a high level of quality in education and care settings in the formative and pivotal years before the commencement of formal schooling have been shown to have improved outcomes for success within their later educational achievements (OECD, 2006; Tayler, 2012). The reverse is also true; young children who experience poor quality care and education in the early years demonstrate a reduction in education and social outcomes (Schweinhart et al., 2005). In Australia, the policy context which seeks to promote high quality is set down within the *National Quality Framework*

(*NQF*) (2009). As a set of policy measures, it is an effort to respond to the growing body of international research-based evidence that underpins the importance of quality within the early years.

Historically, the care and education of our youngest children in Western Australia has been segregated. Childcare was regulated to the realm of care; exclusive of education. Education was deemed the remit of schools. This unfounded and mistaken division endured until the *NQF* was launched in 2009 (Brennan, 2009 in Bowes & Grace, 2009). The rationale for the development of the *NQF* lies within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) 2006 paper, *Starting Strong II*.

Starting Strong II recorded that Australia as a nation, was trailing well behind other countries of comparable economic status relative to both investment in the early years and overall educational output in general. A connection was made between these two findings. The correlation between investment in early childhood care and education and lifelong social and educational outcomes is well documented (Currie, 2009; Heckman, 2007). The OECD's report called on the Australian Government to invest in the early years to bring about a more cohesive, integrated and unified approach to promoting quality across the board by developing a sectoral structure where care and education were less segregated and more integrated conceptually, perceptually and practically.

The Australian Government's response was set down within the strategy, *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009). It establishes the commitment to take action to achieve this cohesiveness through unification of education and care within the early years sector. The main thesis of the strategy drew on international research justifications for change and set down a clear Governmental commitment to increasing the quality of care and education experiences for children aged birth to 8 years. The strategy also unequivocally affirms that Australia must expand development opportunities for young children as a way of improving long term educational, social, health and wellbeing outcomes (COAG, 2009).

The *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (2009) evolved into the *NQF* (2011). The framework focuses on quality for children in education and care services between the ages of birth and eight years of age (COAG, 2009). This framework is made up of four initiatives. Together these form a legislative framework, a clear quality standard, a quality assessment and rating system and a national organisation called Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The *National Quality Standard (NQS)* (ACECQA, 2013) is charged with establishing the standard of quality that underpins the integrity of services which provide for children age 0-5 years. The *NQF* includes *The Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming (EYLF)* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The *NQF* also establishes a policy context for educators working with children aged birth to age 5 in Childcare and in schools. The *EYLF* includes practical outcomes, principles and practices for a variety of settings and contexts. The document also calls on the sector to ensure that children have *agency and voice* and emphasises the requirement that educators must seek to work holistically with children.

In underpinning the importance of holistic education, the *EYLF* is building on a vast growing body of international research that evidences that children who develop holistic well-being are much more successful learners, have higher health outcomes, better lifelong relationships, invest more in their communities and are more active within their commitment to the sustainability of the environment (Gordon, O'Toole & Whitman, 2008). The *EYLF* also emphasises the complex role of the educator in supplying children with experiences that support them to develop holistically through play, social interaction, connection and engagement.

One striking measure, within the whole evolving policy context, that has had far reaching effects within Childcare, is the new requirement for Childcare Services to employ a qualified teacher. The aims of the requirement are to further the integration of education within care settings and raise the levels of quality. Its impact has yet to be formally measured. This study sheds some light however on some unforeseen problems with its design. Supporting structures that bolster its implementation will certainly be needed if it is to achieve its double aim of raising quality and integrating education and care within the sector.

2 PROJECT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This research project utilised a mixed method approach to investigate the perceptions and expectations of pre-service teachers both before and after engaging in a 10 week practicum experience in Childcare. The aim of this investigation was to determine how these students, in their third year of a four year Bachelor's degree, perceived the sector to ascertain if these perceptions changed following the immersion experience. The research design adopted quantitative surveys and the qualitative technique of semi-structured interviews.

A mixed methods approach to this investigation was selected for its ability to allow the integration and comparison of data collected quantitatively and qualitatively as this method facilitates both "statistical and thematic techniques" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.27). Benefits of a mixed methods approach are described by Creswell (2014) as providing "a more complete understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data alone" (p. 19). In this investigation, the gathering of data through a quantitative survey with a follow-up interview was viewed as providing more comprehensive data on the pre-service teachers' perceptions and expectations of the Childcare sector. A convergent parallel model of mixed methods was used whereby the two data sets were collected and analysed distinctively and then compared (Creswell, 2014).

2.1.1 Quantitative Methods

Quantitative methods provide "a numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (Creswell, 2014, p.155). This investigation sought to establish the perceptions of the pre-service teacher population pre and post the Childcare practicum through the quantitative technique of surveys.

The use of a personal survey was employed as they "are appropriate when we want to learn about self-reported beliefs or behaviours" (Neuman, 2011, p.309). The survey consisted of 22 items and asked pre-service teachers to rate how they felt against various statements related to education and care, employment and conditions in the Childcare context. The survey was administered, and consent obtained from 30 participants, during a pre-requisite class to the Childcare practicum, approximately one month prior to undertaking the experience. Surveys were completed anonymously to protect the identity of the pre-service teachers. As emphasised by Neuman (2011), the survey was trialled to ensure it avoided ambiguous or vague language. Surveys were statistically analysed against each of the 22 items. In the second phase of this investigation, the 30 participants were re-issued the same survey one month after the conclusion of the 10 week Childcare experience. Once analysed against each item, the overall data set was compared to the initial survey responses. Survey data was also used for a comparison to the qualitative data set.

2.1.2 Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods typically involve "the techniques associated with the gathering, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of *narrative* information" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.6). Qualitative methods in this investigation provided an opportunity to gather more comprehensive data on pre-service teachers' perceptions and expectations of the Childcare sector and was used in conjunction with the quantitative data set as part of a mixed methods approach. Qualitative research commonly involves interviewing (Neuman, 2011) and this investigation utilised this method.

Following the quantitative survey, pre-service teachers who had provided consent, were interviewed. The interviews followed a semi-structured format as this allows for the interviewer to probe areas of interest as they arise, and the ordering of the questions is less important (Smith, 2008). The interviewer's role in the semi-structured interview is "to facilitate and guide rather than dictate" (Smith, 2008, p.63) and this provides opportunity for the interviewer to focus on what the respondent is saying. The interview process consisted of open-ended questions regarding the pre-services teachers' expectations, and later perceptions, regarding the Childcare sector. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were conducted on the university campus. The same interview questions were used both one month prior to, and one month after the conclusion of, the practicum experience.

Both sets of interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Participants were allocated a pseudonym at interview in order to de-identify data. In analysing the transcripts, these were read repeatedly and coded to draw out themes. In the coding process, as suggested by Neuman (2011), open coding was used initially to identify major themes and categories within individual transcripts. Subsequently, selective coding was used whereby comparisons were made after all data sets had been collected to determine major themes. As a result, six themes were identified, and most notably, the identification of professional status as a key theme.

2.2 Data Analysis Comparison

As a mixed method approach requires that the quantitative and qualitative data sets are integrated (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), once analysed distinctively, the survey and interviews were compared in this study. The comparison between the themes identified through the coding of transcripts and the statistical data gained through the survey analysis ensured validity of the investigation.

2.3 Participant Selection

Participants for this investigation were selected purposively. Purposive sampling involves a “non-random sample in which the researcher ... locates all possible cases of a highly specific...population” (Neuman, 2011, p. 267). The target population for this study was pre-service teachers within the early childhood Bachelor of Education degree. As this study sought to investigate the perceptions and expectations of this population prior to, and at the commencement of, their experience in Childcare, the third year cohort were selected due to the proximity in the course to this practicum. Pre-service teachers were invited to be a part of the research project during a pre-requisite class to the practicum. At this time, pre-service teachers had the option to consent to complete the survey and/or interview or neither. Through this process, 30 participants consented to being involved in the investigation, with the option to withdraw at any time.

3 THE DIVISION BETWEEN CARE AND EDUCATION

Growing evidence from international social, educational and neuro-scientific research indicates that high quality ECE programs have a dramatic positive impact later in life. As a result Western economies have recently started to address the issue of provision of high quality childcare as an educational goal (Thorpe, Millear, & Petriwskyj, 2012). This recognition for the Childcare sector as intrinsically educational has resulted in a growing awareness of the need for unification and integration with care and education; disciplines that traditionally have been viewed as separate entities by policy makers internationally (O'Connor, McGunnigle, Treasure & Davie, 2014).

This movement was acknowledged by the participants of this study with 98% disagreeing that education was more important than care; both before and after their practicum experience. In addition, the number who allocated equal importance to care and education almost doubled following their exposure to Childcare practice within the practicum. Furthermore, almost all of the participants interviewed spoke strongly of their support for the value of unification.

“You can teach through the care process...both support each other...both are important”.

“I think they cross over...to educate you should care and a carer should educate...I think they're both pretty much equally as important as each other”.

The Australian policy context which aims to move the sector into an integrated space is an important one as it officially recognises the educational value of care. This recognition will impact on a huge number of young children. Long day care was used by over 801 000 children under the age of 5 in 2006 and the number is rising. The Jovanovic study shows that this growth trend is likely to continue as more women return to work and welfare payments are reduced. Demand for Childcare workers outstrips supply in Australia (2013). The discontent of the educators within the Childcare sector is also

rising. The staff turnover rate is up to 60% in some Australian states and 51% of educators agreed that they would leave the sector today if they could (Jovanovic, 2013).

“I think she was angry because she doesn’t like her job; well actually that’s not wholly fair, she does like the work itself but not the fact that everyone thinks it’s a basic job that doesn’t take any skill. It’s so unfair on them really. They actually need as much knowledge and skills as a teacher does, probably more if I am being totally honest”.

The complexity of the role of educators within a Childcare setting is well documented. The Recchia and Shin study of early childhood pre-service teachers undertaking a practicum with infants in New York, found that practical experiences enabled pre-service teachers to re-think their traditional beliefs about the needs of infants and their sense of themselves as teachers (2010). Many of the pre-service teachers expressed initial shock and fear in the foreign infant setting and then struggled to redefine their role as teachers. As they were encouraged to observe children without jumping in they began to realise the depth of the work involved. Pre-verbal infants engaged with educators using gestures and minimal language. In addition to the power of observation the pre-service teachers learnt about the intimacy associated with caregiving and how to manage a professional emotional connection as a medium for education. The study showed that the professional role of the infant caregiver is a highly involved one (Recchia & Shin, 2010).

4 POWER DYNAMICS AND ENSUING CHORDS OF DISCONTENT

Many of this study’s participants were challenged by the power dynamics they experienced on their Childcare practicums.

“She belittled teachers every chance she could. It was like an opportunity for her to pay us back for how much more status teachers have in the overall education community by showing us how little we have within Childcare”.

“I was made to feel kind of worthless from the start, the girls in my room didn’t even use my name, they just called me student”.

“I don’t know how many times a day I heard *what would you know you are only a student*. I think they had a hang up about the degree and went out of their way to belittle it”.

This inversion of the power dynamics is very interesting. It appears to be a reaction against the deep injustice ingrained within the differences in recognition for work with children that is classified as care and work with children that is classified as education. The unofficial disempowering of teachers within Childcare has been documented beyond this study. In Grarock and Morrissey’s study (2013), degree qualified teachers felt able to implement changes in their own programs but not across their centre. A key barrier to implementing change across the centre was a lack of authority which was keenly felt and clearly communicated.

For the participants of this study, this disempowering resulted in many pre-service teachers feeling discouraged to view Childcare as a viable career option. The percentage who strongly agreed that they saw themselves solely as a school based teacher went from 35% before the Childcare practicum to 65% after the experience. The qualitative data illuminates this as being closely related to the power dynamics and their repercussions for feelings of discontent within the Childcare environment.

“I don’t think teachers are welcome within Childcare. I didn’t feel welcome and I won’t be going back”.

“If they don’t want me then I don’t want them”.

The experience and especially, the emotion associated with the experience, has a lasting effect on whether pre-service teachers remain open to a career in Childcare following the Childcare practicum. Where the experience was encouraging and the emotion positive, the connection to Childcare as a viable career option is strengthened; where the experience and emotion are negative, the connection is severed.

“There is no way that I will ever darken Childcare’s door again. It is clear to me that I am not wanted within that sector”.

“I went in not really knowing if it was something I wanted to do or not, I was made to feel so welcome that I really loved it. I would totally think of it as a future opportunity”.

5 PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, STATUS, PAY AND CONDITIONS; DIFFERENT IN EVERY WAY.

The main reasons for these conflicts lie within the differences in what is offered to educators depending on whether they fall on the care or education side of the ledger. Despite the research evidencing conjointly the equal importance of both roles (Thorpe, Millear, & Petriwskyj, 2012) and the importance of their integration (O’Connor, McGunnigle, Treasure & Davie, 2014), the practical divide between both groups couldn’t be wider. Opportunities for further qualification, professional status, professional recognition, rates of pay and working conditions such as leave arrangements are all considerably higher for teachers than they are for Childcare workers.

“I reckon Childcare is just as important and they do just as much work, so I don’t understand why they don’t get the same benefits”.

Essentially the status, pay and conditions are less for Childcare workers because the training period is substantially less in terms of both time investment and competitive entry. However, when the importance of the task is analysed, this argument is compromised. Holding true to the assumption that it is the children that are most important within the entire Education and Care sector, requires us to acknowledge that the lack of opportunity to up-skill and become degree educated while working as a Childcare worker is one of the main inequalities. Trapping Childcare workers in low paid, low status positions at the same time as requiring degree qualified teachers to be their colleagues is inevitably going to breed discontent and create further division in the sector; a very different outcome to the unification and integration that is at the heart of its design. The quality of children’s’ experiences in Childcare is well documented to be closely related to the level of qualification of the educator. Educators with higher qualifications are more likely to engage in more sensitive play and interactions with children, bringing greater holistic educational outcomes to the experience (Rouse, Morrissey & Rahimi, 2012). True integration within the sector should empower Childcare workers to seek degree qualification and thereby raise the level of education within each level of each Childcare centre and not merely the micro level at which the teacher is empowered to enact change (Garrock & Morrissey, 2013).

6 THE IMPORTANCE OF ADULT EDUCATOR HARMONY ON THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN WITHIN EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS

Occupational stress including burnout, anxiety disorders and depression are common place within Childcare. These disproportional levels are generally attributed to the combination of the work being

both highly demanding and greatly undervalued (Wagner et al., 2013). Adult well-being has a direct impact on child well-being; greater levels of training also lead to more sensitive and positive interactions which result in better holistic educational outcomes for children (Norris, 2010).

Childcare workers have indicated that they lack formal qualifications and would like to improve their skills and knowledge (Jovanovic, 2013). The idea of access to training and education to overcome issues in staff retention in Childcare is not a new one but accessibility structures are needed to make it a practical choice for Childcare workers to up-skill to degree level while remaining in employment. European models of flexible Education and Care Degree pathways are available (European Commission, 2013). Supporting the achievement of higher qualifications will undoubtedly bring change within the allocation of status, recognition and eventually pay and conditions. This professionalisation has been trialed within several professions including nursing, social work and even teaching itself. The benefits of professionalisation (through training and qualification) for children are well documented. Supporting individual Childcare workers in their training has been shown to lead to improved work with young children on the floor (Jovanovic, 2013).

Parental fees however, cannot realistically be expected to meet the costs of up-skilling the Childcare workforce and meet the financial demands of the ensuing pay and conditions review. Government investment in the Childcare sector as a true integrated element of education for our youngest children is an absolute necessity. If quality is the true aim of the Australian policy context, then investment in ALL of the educators who work within Childcare is paramount.

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