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Educator identities. Emerging issues within personal and professional identities: Changes experienced by Australian pre-service teachers following professional exposure to educational practice within childcare settings

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a research project investigating the perceptions and expectations held by pre-service teachers regarding the childcare sector. It presents the views of a group of pre-service teachers both before and after their exposure to practice within childcare following a ten week practicum. The personal experiences of the research participants impacted greatly on their evolutionary understanding of and attitude towards the childcare sector. Thematic analysis of the data produced several key concepts that illuminated issues of identity conflict across the care and education divide.

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 Australia's implementation of the policy requiring a qualified teacher to be employed within childcare settings from 2014 onwards.

Keywords: early childhood education, childcare, identity, professional status, pre-service teachers, practicum.

Introduction: The Western Australian context for early childhood education and care

Extensive research exists advocating for high quality early learning experiences for children from birth to eight years (McCain, Mustard, & Shanke, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Tayler, 2012). In particular, research suggests that children who experience quality education and care settings in the pre-compulsory school setting have improved opportunities for success in later learning (OECD, 2006; Tayler, 2012). The Australian Government has enacted a policy ensemble known as the *National Quality Framework* in an attempt to act on international research evidence regarding the need to improve quality in early years settings, in particular, long day care centres.

Historically, the education and care of children in Australia has been segregated. In the 1900's childcare existed in the form of 'Day Nurseries' (Brennan, 2009, as cited in Bowes & Grace, 2009). 'Day Nurseries' were said to offer care for children, as opposed to educating them, and this dichotomous relationship has existed until the *National Quality Framework* was enacted in 2009. Several influences have been pivotal in the Government's movement towards improved quality, through the integration of care and education, in childcare within Australia.

However despite considerable policy attention and significant advances in recent years, Australia's early childhood education and care services remain fragmented.

The OECD released their paper, *Starting Strong II* in 2006. This report clearly illustrated that when compared to other countries of comparable economic status, Australia was well behind in regards to investment in the early years as many OECD countries have well established systems of early childhood education and care explicitly worked out in the context of other social programs of income support, health and parental leave. In Australia this lack of investment in the early years was interpreted as correlating to poor output by the nation. The link between early investment and long term output, and therefore, long term gains for society is widely accepted (Currie, 2009; Heckman, 2007). The OECD's report also articulated the need for the Australian Government to initiate a unified approach toward the early years, where education and care are viewed as integrated rather than dichotomous. This has been and continues to be an enormous challenge for the Government.

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* (2009a). The purpose of this strategy was to draw on international research, including that presented in the OECD's *Starting Strong II* (2006), to communicate the Government's interest in raising quality in settings involving children aged birth to 5 years. This strategy acknowledged the important opportunity that exists in long day care centres to address development concerns early and therefore minimise the impact of risk factors (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009a). The strategy explicitly states that it seeks to improve, 'health, cognitive and social development leading to improved transition to school and improved educational, employment, health and wellbeing outcomes' (COAG, 2009a, p. 4).

The *National Quality Framework* (2009b) is a derivative of *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (2009a). The Framework identified the need for streamlined regulatory arrangements, including quality assurances, for children aged from birth to eight years of age (COAG, 2009b). 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 the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The *National Quality Standard* (COAG, 2009b) outlines specific standards of quality required of services that provide both care and education for children from 0 to 5 years of age. The Standard is based on international research, as noted in *The Guide to the National Quality Standard* and is designed to 'give services and families a better understanding of a quality service' (ACECQA, 2013). The seven Standards comprise elements of both process and structural interpretations of quality, as suggested in empirical research (Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2010; Ramey & Ramey, 2006; Tayler, 2009).

The Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming (DEEWR, 2009) which forms one part of the *National Quality Framework* provides an outline for educators working with children aged birth to age 5 and through the transition to school. As a national policy, this document is intended to provide 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 research that indicates that;

children who experience a greater sense of holistic well-being are more likely to learn in effective ways, engage in healthy and fulfilling social behaviours, and invest in their own and others' well-being and in the sustainability of the planet, as they take up their social, professional and leadership roles in adulthood (Gordon, O'Toole, & Whitman, 2008, p.9).

The principles and practices outlined in the document emphasise the role of the educator in providing children with opportunities to play, to learn, to enjoy a childhood and to be provided with continuity in their learning. The EYLF guides educators in their curriculum decision making and assists in providing young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning.

The *Childcare Act* of 2007 outlines regulatory requirements for compliance by services in order to operate as a childcare facility, with particular focus on licensing arrangements for services. An important aspect of the *Childcare Act* (2007) is that it specifically states its focus

on care prior to school age, explicitly excluding children aged 3 years and above enrolled in educational programs on school sites. This resonates with some long held views that a teacher's role in early childhood education should be confined to preschool programs (Rouse, Morrissey, & Rahimi, 2012).

The *Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act (2012a)* is Western Australian legislation enacted in 2012. This Act made significant changes to several pre-existing Acts, including the *Childcare Act 2007*. This legislation noted the role of services in providing for both the education and care of children, and this is clearly articulated in the stated objectives. Of particular importance, the *Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act (2012a)* included the procedure for being audited against the *National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009b)* and the responsibility of the regulatory body, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), in governing this process.

In Western Australia over the last century, early childhood services were 'predominantly...single-purpose facilities addressing care, health or education. Broadly speaking, the Commonwealth (federal-level) Government led the childcare system and the various state and territory governments have led the preschool systems' (Tayler, 2012, p. 8). In 2012, the Western Australian Education Department created 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 significant move towards integrating education and care.

When the National Quality Framework was introduced in 2012 it was agreed that the Framework would apply to both childcare and preschool/kindergarten services, requiring both systems to meet the same standards and to improve child:staff ratios and staff qualifications. Despite the Western Australian government initially agreeing to the changes in childcare, they resisted the changes in preschool and kindergarten services as they fall under the education system. Even so, in 2013 the Minister for Education informed all principals that early childhood education programs (Pre-Kindergarten to Year 2) in Western Australian schools would be required to meet the NQS from January 2015, however aspects of the NQS which specify staff qualifications, age specific child-to-staff ratios and age specific physical environment requirements would apply only to Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. In

Western Australia the childcare sector is assessed and rated on the standards by the Education and Care Regulatory Unit who is responsible for administering legislation under which education and care services are approved, However, in schools it is the principals who are responsible for improving school performance in the early childhood years by referring to the NQS to conduct an internal NQS audit each year in their school and keeping a record of that internal audit.

These policy changes have had implications for childcare service provision within Western Australia (WA). Historically, the aim of the school has been education, and the aim of the childcare service, 'to care' (Childcare Act, 2007; School Education Amendment Bill, 2012b). Whilst other states within Australia have provided for integrated service delivery for some years (Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010), a unique time exists within WA, as services not only attempt to integrate education and care sectors, but also comply with standards of quality within their service. As part of the *National Quality Framework* (COAG, 2009b) educators in the childcare sector are responsible for implementing the *Early Years Learning Framework*, a document advocating for the integration of education and care across 0-8 year old settings.

However for a country trying to integrate education and care sectors, there is still much divide between working in these two sectors. These include pay and conditions, status and qualifications. Low wages have long been a concern within the childcare industry. Research conducted by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (2006) highlighted that compared to workers in other sectors with similar levels of responsibilities for care and education of children, childcare workers were being short-changed. Poor wages mean that employers find it difficult to attract and retain good workers. This situation was also reported by Watson (2006) who noted that 'employees in the childcare sector experience lower pay, less recognition, fewer opportunities for professional development, and poorer working conditions than their counterparts in schools and preschools' (p. 14). According to Bretherton (2010) the wage discrepancy between childcare and the education sector is widely acknowledged to be a deep retention challenge for the childcare sector. Furthermore, research conducted by the National Association of Community Based Children's Services (2006, as cited in Jovanovic, 2013) suggests that early childhood educators take little action to improve their own wages and work conditions because they know it is parents and families who ultimately pay for these changes through increased service fees.

A previous Australian study examined early childhood teacher's willingness to consider working within childcare settings and attempted to identify some of the barriers associated with teachers working in childcare settings (Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood, & Brownlee, 2011). The results indicated that although attitudes to maternal work and childcare were largely positive, few would prefer to work in childcare under the current conditions. Unsurprisingly, some of the key barriers identified were primarily structural factors including pay, work hours and poor status of the work, particularly as they compare to other forms of potential employment (Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood, & Brownlee, 2011). This is hardly surprising given that childcare is one of the lowest status and poorest paid sectors in our economy, despite the crucial service that childcare workers provide. A 2011 report on the feasibility study into the provision of preschool in childcare settings (Alderson & Martin, 2011) found that teachers working in childcare services do not fall within industrial awards that apply for teachers in Western Australian schools; they are employed under different conditions and mostly receive lower rates of pay.

There is great divide between the pay of early childhood educators in different settings and under different awards. Under the *Children Services Award 2010* a teacher with a 4 year degree in early childhood education commences on Level 6 which is approx. \$53,508 per year (Australian Industrial Relations Commission, 2010). Under the *Educational Services (Teachers) Award 2010* a full-time four year trained teacher who works in a children's or early childhood service, such as a long day care centre, will commence on Level 3 and progress according to Level 12 of the scale (\$48,587 - \$64,140 after 9 years) (Fair Work Ombudsman (2014). Under the *School Education Act Employees' (Teachers and Administrators) General Agreement 2011* a graduate teacher who is employed by the Department of Education commences on Level 2.1 \$63,118, progressing to \$69,254 after one year and up to \$75,793 after two years of satisfactory teaching service (Department of Education Western Australia, 2014).

If the divide of care and education is to be addressed then early childhood educators should be receiving the same pay and conditions regardless of the setting in which they are working. Removing the pay and status difference between early childhood educators working in childcare and school settings is an important step towards integrating education and care.

However, according to Bretherton (2010) ‘the inequity between teachers in early childhood care settings and teachers in school settings extends beyond pay to all of the structural underpinnings of working life, including annual leave, rostering, workload management, planning and programming entitlements’ (p. 27).

Low community recognition and lack of professional status have also been a concern in childcare settings. Bretherton (2010) argued that this had led to workers leaving the childcare sector. A 2011 Productivity Commission report which examined the workforce of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector revealed a widespread view that ECEC workers experience high stress, poor morale and a lack of public recognition. In addition, the professional status of teachers in childcare settings is not as that of teachers in other education settings, and there is a widespread perception that teachers in childcare are not real teachers (Ali, 2009, as cited in Rouse, Morrissey, & Rahimi, 2012). Current policy, at the federal level, appears to recognise the need to lift the status of work in the childcare sector in order to provide a more stable and committed pool of workers for the industry (Bretherton, 2010). The Commonwealth has also taken measures to expand the numbers of university places specifically in the early childhood teacher stream. However, recent research studies show that the very pre-service teachers who are enrolled in these degree programs have a reluctance to work in childcare (Gibson, 2013; Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood, & Brownlee, 2011; Thorpe, Milliar, & Petriwskyj, 2012). There is also the suggestion that some childcare employees are unwilling to participate in training, as it yields little return in terms of elevating their status or their income.

There is a significant amount of research pointing to a higher quality of care and better outcomes for children when centres employed degree qualified early childhood teachers (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2009, pp. 63–65; OECD, 2006). Under the National Regulations and the Early Years Learning Framework childcare directors and early childhood teachers act as pedagogical leaders ‘guiding other educators in their planning and reflection, and mentoring colleagues in their implementation practices’ (ACECQA, 2013, p. 85). The National Quality Agenda (NQA) suggests that effective pedagogical leadership requires a tertiary degree, such as a four year teaching degree or equivalent, as well as a number of years of work experience coupled with professional development (DEEWR, 2010). However, a recent study examining teachers’ perceptions of

their abilities to be educational leaders in Victorian childcare settings found that teachers reported feeling that their qualification did not earn them an automatic right to suggest or implement change, especially as they often saw the work they did as fundamentally similar to that of the other staff (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013). Rouse, Morrissey and Rahimi (2012) argue that the policy for all childcare settings to employ a degree-qualified teacher by 2014 is widening the education and care divide in early childhood settings with the role of the diploma-qualified early childhood practitioner now viewed as less worthy with lower status than that of the degree qualified teacher.

The research project

The policy context and its resultant requirement that early childhood education and care settings employ a qualified early childhood teacher is the subject of much debate across the sector(s) in WA. There is much anecdotal evidence that qualified teachers are reluctant to work within the childcare sector. Universities that train early childhood teachers are required to integrate practicum time spent directly with children under two years of age into their course's practical experience components. This requires direct contact with the childcare sector as pre-service teachers. A previous Australian study analysed whether a practicum in a childcare setting would improve attitudes to childcare and willingness to consider working within childcare settings (Thorpe, Milllear, & Petriwskyj, 2012). Quantitative measures of attitudes to childcare and levels of willingness to work in childcare were taken before and after the practicum experience. Unsurprisingly, the study found considerable individual differences influenced by the individual experience of each student. The influencing factors were the relationship they had with the childcare based educators and leaders as well as their opinion on the quality of the model of education undertaken within their host service (Thorpe, Milllear, & Petriwskyj, 2012).

The research team behind this project wished to delve into the impact of that all important individual experience. A mixed methodology was decided upon which included a significant qualitative element allowing for a nuanced thematic analysis of the individual experience. A cohort of 38 pre-service teachers in their third year of a four year teaching degree were surveyed and of those 17 took part in the interviews. The survey used was developed to investigate the perceptions and expectations held by pre-service teachers regarding the Childcare sector. The pre-service teachers participating in this study completed the 22-item

rating scale by specifying their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for each of the statements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted 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. 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.

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. Both surveys and interviews were conducted before and after the childcare practicum. These illustrative data provided a sense of reality, describing exactly what the informant felt and perceived before and after their practicum experiences. Thematic analysis of the data produced several key concepts that illuminated issues of identity conflict across the care and education divide.

Findings

This paper presents one of the qualitative findings of the study. Issues of identity emerged very strongly from the qualitative data. Identity based trepidation was evident within the pre-practicum cohort and identity based concrete opinions were evident in the post-practicum data. The surprising element was that the data sets did not match. Pre-practicum fears and trepidations on identity issues did not correlate to ending the practicum with these fears realised. Participants regardless of their pre-practicum positionality were strongly influenced by the positivity or negativity of their individual experience. The relationships were the cornerstone of their individual experiences. The dynamic between them as educators and the childcare workers as educators was the central point of all harmony and all conflict. With the relationships as the cornerstone of their experience, what was the cornerstone of their relationships? In the vast majority of cases, identity was.

Varying levels of education and knowledge as an identity based issue

Where there was harmony within the relationships, there was mutual respect on the part of both the childcare based educator and the pre-service teacher for the educational role and

knowledge of the other. Participants with harmonious relationships respected the educational input of their hosts.

‘I think they know a lot more than I thought they would. I thought that because they only go to college for a year or two and because it’s not in a uni that they wouldn’t know as much about the education side of things but they do.’

‘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...which they did.’

And they in turn felt respected as knowledgeable educators.

‘I know some of the girls didn’t like it as much as I did. I got on very well because I liked them and they liked me. They were very interested in the degree and very respectful of the fact that I had a lot of theoretical knowledge around child development and children’s learning. They didn’t run it down at all and made me feel like a valued part of the team, someone who has knowledge.’

‘We all felt really accepted, the centre really appreciated our contributions.’

The converse was also true within the cohort of participants that had a negative experience and negative relationships. Where negativity dominated the professional relationship, it was often motivated by a foundational lack of respect for the educational qualification and knowledge base of the other.

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

Many of the participants who experienced negativity in their relationships on the practicum and identified the issue of respect as a primary cause, also identified a sense of defensiveness or reactionary inferiority in relation to the divide of being degree trained rather than non-degree trained.

‘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.’

It also emerged strongly that this resulted in equal amounts of defensiveness on the part of the pre-service teacher participants who more often than not responded with a similar reaction to the educational base of the other.

‘It made me feel defensive, I mean they went to TAFE for one year and I’ve been in uni for three, soon four, who was she to talk down to me? I think I know as much if not more than her. She didn’t know much anyway from what I could see.’

In almost all cases, the dynamics of the relationship were set down in the early days of the practicum, certainly within the first two weeks. The origin of the relationships were largely centred on judgement of each others knowledge base. In some cases this was immediate. The participant felt within the first couple of days that the childcare based educators resented their presence and resented their training. In other cases, it evolved from things that happened within the flow of the day and resulted in one judging the other on a pedagogical level.

‘I think it is really important to stay calm when you are dealing with challenging behaviour. She knew that I didn’t approve of how she reacted and then she got defensive, talking down teachers and talking down the degree too. We didn’t really respect each other’s knowledge and we both knew it. It’s hard to come back to a good place once that’s out there.’

Conditions of employment as an identity based issue

Where there was negativity within the professional relationships, the practicum experience was generally viewed negatively by the participants. It also correlated directly with their decision not to seek employment in childcare post graduation as an early years teacher. The conditions of employment were all highlighted by this group as a further rationale for their decision to write childcare off as a viable career option.

‘They get paid less, they get less holidays, the days are longer, no thanks. I mean, I didn’t really enjoy it, I thought the girls were mean but to give them their due it’s actually really hard work and there is no way that I am going to work somewhere I don’t enjoy for the kind of conditions they

Unfortunately, even when the experience was enjoyed and the relationships were positive the conditions of employment were an obstacle to the participant's ability to envisage themselves seeking employment within the childcare sector.

'I really enjoyed childcare, and I'd work there, if it paid better.'
offer, I didn't spend four years at university getting a professional qualification so that I could work under those conditions, no thanks.'

'I would probably choose a school but only because of the hours and the pay, I really enjoyed my prac.'

Status as an identity based issue

Status was raised at both the pre and post-practicum interviews. Participants at the pre-practicum stage were concerned about their status as an educator in childcare. There were definite and strong opinions that educators in schools held a higher status within their community. Most felt that this was justified as they were four year degree trained and worked solely in the field of education rather than in the less defined educare sector.

'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.'

The post practicum data showed a similar assessment of the difference in levels of status between the two educational sectors. However, there was a very marked turn around in the participant's views around the justification of this difference.

'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.'

'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.'

Unfortunately, the issue of status as a marker for their identity resulted in many pro-childcare educators choosing not to view it as a viable career option.

I absolutely loved working in childcare, I loved the age group of the kids and the play based approach and the real sense of making a difference. I am disappointed that the pay is so low and the hours are so long and the holidays are so bad but I think I could get over all of that but I don't know if I could get over the status issue. I am pretty sure that my family would be disappointed if I went into childcare rather than into a school.'

Conclusion

This paper has focused on some issues of identity as educators within a divided care and education system within Western Australia's early years sector. Pre-Service teachers are being encouraged by the policy directions to take up positions within childcare settings as well as within schools. The participants of this study are generally reluctant to do so. The biggest reason for this choice is that they experienced negative relationships while on their childcare practicum which have unfortunately negatively coloured their view of the sector. It is notable that the data shows that those negative relationships stemmed from feelings of division and lack of mutual respect for educators from both systems.

For those whose experiences and relationship were positive, reluctance to work within the sector was also present. This reluctance stemmed from an interpretation on the part of the participants of the practicalities of working in one side of the sector over another. The issues of pay, conditions and professional status all impacted heavily on their decision making process. A minority of participants were able to overcome these issues and embrace the childcare sector as their natural pedagogical home.

'I loved it, from day one I loved it, I can't see myself anywhere else now, I just want to finish my degree and get straight into childcare, it suits me down to the ground; play based, holistic and developmentally meaningful in terms of the impact I can make, I love every bit of it.'

Even those participant's who made the decision that working within childcare is not in their future, could see the value of the childcare practicum however. This was the case in the vast majority of participants.

‘I’m so glad I had that experience with children in those developmental areas because I would not have had that in any other environment.’

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