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Preparing Practitioners to work with young children and their families in uncertain times: understanding contexts

Abstract

The preparation of graduates to work effectively in the early childhood education and care sector is of particular relevance in times of dramatic policy reform (Griffith University, 2001). Graduates entering the workforce can find themselves working in contexts of which they have limited experience. As such, preparatory university programs of study need to reflect these changes and ensure that degree programs that are offered do indeed meet the ever-changing needs of the students that enrol, providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills that are transferable across this broad community sector.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care (ECEC), pre-service ECEC degree programs, reflective ECEC practitioners, community.

Introduction

Whilst much has been written about the tensions that exist in Australian early childhood education and care policy and practice (Fleer, 2000; OECD, 2001; Press & Hayes, 2000), there is a further need to examine closely the knowledge base, policies and practices of early childhood education and care, in order to reflect upon the appropriateness of practitioner preparation. Such endeavours may provide an approach to

structures and practices that allow for a seamless transition for ECEC service reform as well as practitioner preparedness.

The preparation of graduates to work effectively in the early childhood education and care sector is of particular relevance in times of dramatic policy reform (Fleer, 2000; Griffith University, 2003). Preparatory early childhood education and care university programs of study, specifically involving practicum experiences, need to reflect these changes and ensure that learning experiences that are offered do indeed meet the ever-changing needs of the students that enrol, providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills that are transferable to their future employment across this broad community sector. The assumption behind this paper is that the professional early childhood education and care practitioner requires the ability to reflect, and learn from this reflection. An important part, therefore, of the training and education of ECEC practitioners is to facilitate the development of skills in critical reflection.

The aim of this paper is to explore the need for critical reflection due to the disjunctures between the realities of the ECEC practitioner "communities" and the aspirations for close bonds which characterises the use of the term particularly during times of political, social and economic fragmentation, for undergraduate university students preparing to enter the ECEC community. Throughout this document, the "term early childhood education and care" (ECEC) is used to denote formal centre-based early childhood services that provide education and care for young children under the compulsory age for school. This definition is supported internationally, evidenced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, *Starting Strong*, (2001), where ECEC is used to describe services such as preschool, kindergarten and child care.

In times of uncertain futures and dramatic policy reform, this paper discusses the perceived challenges and the preparedness as reflective practitioners, of students undertaking a specifically designed course, including a practicum component. That is, the aim is to develop an

understanding of the students' understandings of skills of critical reflection.

The possible reframing of the public provision of services for young children is receiving much attention by both the state and national levels of governments in Australia (Commonwealth Government, 1999; Council of Australian Government (COAG) Child Care Working Group, 1995; Queensland Government, 2000). The promotion of the need for systemic reform and the development of more flexible and integrated services are also evident in the international arena (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2001). Such reform directly impacts the professionals and practitioners working within these services. In developing an account of the preparedness of graduates to work within this ECEC sector, it is essential that these students' understandings be understood in accordance with the current ECEC policy reforms.

Within the university community, there is considerable interest and concern, both among the undergraduate students and the academics, in so far as to the extent to which undergraduate programs prepare graduates for the reality of work as beginning reflective practitioners across the ECEC sector, in light of possible future reforms. This study has important implications for the improvement of critical reflection skills and abilities of undergraduate ECEC practitioners, as a part of teacher education programs generally, being reflective of current priorities and values of the national context in which they are embedded (Fleet, 2000). Of increasing concern is the preparation of new practitioners to work within such a reformed framework.

The paper provides an overview of an in-progress study, aimed at identifying the conceptions of undergraduate students' preparedness as reflective practitioners for their work with young children and their families across the ECEC sector. This is legitimated by the present climate of reform within the ECEC sector, and, as such is a timely investigation. Coupled with this, is the need to constantly evaluate university ECEC practitioner preparation programs, in order that they

continue to provide students with the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities vital for their effective transition to their chosen areas of professional practice.

This study, in the field of early childhood education and care, has developed from a desire to improve the advanced in-depth knowledge related to the specific skills of critical reflection. At the same time, this study presents an opportunity for involvement in research work that is closely related to the improvement of professional practice (Atwell, 1996; Green, Maxwell & Shanahan, 2001). An evaluative study of this nature enables academics to evaluate, implement, commission, design and administer research into a specific aspect of educational provision. Therefore this study is relevant to the interconnectedness of both the research and practice aspects of the ECEC sector. The nature of this study is to also develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which students understand reflective early childhood practitioner preparation, so as to provide a framework for reflection in professional practice and future preparation programs.

This study attempts to make visible the understandings of critical reflection necessary for ECEC practice. The understandings held by this particular cohort of undergraduate students, of the role that critical reflection has in relation to preparation for practice, is the focus of investigation. Such a focus, located within the context of local issues, may shed light on important themes that are relevant to the preparation of practitioners across other sectors of human services. Therefore, whilst the findings of this particular study may be unique to the chosen demographic location, sample and time, it is anticipated that the findings may stimulate further discussion that takes account of practitioner preparation and expectation.

At Griffith University, in Queensland, Australia, within the School of Human Services, a degree program has been designed and implemented as a response to the perceived need for practitioners to be prepared to practice in a range of diverse settings catering for young children and

their families, supported by current national and state policy contexts and future directions. This degree program has been designed specifically to prepare students to work across the array of ECEC services for young children and their families, based on more generic theoretical frameworks, rather specific contextual elements. Such a program structure has been deemed to better prepare students as reflective practitioners for the early childhood workforce of the future. This study will examine, in an explanatory fashion, the knowledge base upon which students draw in making judgements about their preparation as critically reflective ECEC practitioners. This is in contrast to a more traditional ECEC university course that is structured to prepare students to work within specific ECEC settings, primarily preschools and early primary years. The desire to review the effectiveness of the critical reflection component of this program has led to the conceptualisation of this current study. It will also highlight the impact of these contexts upon reflective practitioner preparation for ECEC services. This paper argues for the need to further theorise and investigate the concept of ECEC professional preparation learning communities.

Review of relevant literature

Within existing literature relating to ECEC practitioner preparation, several important contexts have been identified (Cavanagh, 2002; Cliff, 1996; Hilbert, et al., 2002). These contexts include the theoretical context, the professional and community context, as well as the personal context. The common, identifiable elements amongst each of these contexts are those of learning and reflective practice.

The theoretical context, in this instance, refers to the knowledge base that students must acquire, in order to inform and guide their practices with young children and their families. Such a theoretical context needs to inform practitioner practice, whilst at the same time, growing and improving over time, with experience and in response to future reform within the sector. This theoretical context also guides their development in both their professional and personal contexts.

In this paper, it is recognised that there are inherent difficulties in translating such theory into practice. Indeed, this is an ethical dilemma that many in the field of higher education, as well as ECEC have highlighted (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Fler, 2000; Moss & Petrie, 2002). In response to such dilemmas, an important part of the student's education and training is to facilitate the development of skills in critical reflection. Whilst there is a body of theory on philosophical and ethical standpoints, dilemmas and perspectives that inspire intelligent thinking and broadening of the personal perspective, the body of theory about the learning of these reflective skills is less developed.

In this particular study, an understanding of a reflective practitioner will be investigated, in terms of the ways in which students understand the theoretical context in terms of its role in relation to their professional and personal contexts within the ECEC community in the future, given the climate of policy reform.

Before continuing further, a brief discussion relevant to the perception of the ECEC community and professional context is applicable. The concept of community has become a catch phrase within the wider societal context. Within this terrain, community is a concept with high ethical content. Community is an easy label to apply, and in recent times, particularly in the education and care sectors, this has been done with regularity (O'Farrell, 1994; Queensland Government, 2002). The idea of community has connotations of collectivism, rather than fragmented individualism. Alternatively, the concept of community can be seen as transitory, that is, constantly shifting and changing, rather than a stable entity. The dilemma is centred within the notion of community for graduate students who are preparing to participate in the ECEC community sector, working with young children and their families, as reflective practitioners.

In recent times, the term "community" has been used widely, particularly in social policy. Indeed, community now appears as a prefix to many

government programs and policy reforms. In this sense, the term is used to evoke a sense of togetherness, referring to the notion of holding something in common, an example being community interests, or a sense of common identity. Community is not a static phenomenon. People make continuous choices about their communal identification and the degree of their affiliation. Therefore, students need to be provided opportunities, knowledge and skills to be able to engage in critical reflection; in order to establish, evaluate and maintain membership of the ECEC community.

How then, do students understand their acquisition of membership to the ECEC community of professional practitioners? How do they acquire the identity of, and sense of belonging to, the ECEC community? Collaboration and partnership are some of the well-established conceptions within the literature in relation to ECEC communities. Indeed, interpersonal and group skills, as well as "groupness" are claimed as essential features of ECEC communities (Goodfellow, 1995; McLean, 1991; Walsh et al., 2002). The building of partnerships is a key component of effective curriculum practice and community development (QSCC, 1998; Woodrow, 2000). In ECEC, these partnerships involve practitioners, parents and other professionals from community service organisations, teacher aides and assistants, administrators, licensees, directors as well as other workers essential for the development of ECEC programs which lead to improved outcomes for young children and their families. The development and maintenance of such partnerships, or ECEC communities, is not a prescriptive process, and as such, the future practitioner, i.e. the ECEC student, must emerge from their education program with the capacity to engage in teamwork, to collaborate in curriculum decision-making and therefore have the ability to develop critical reflective practices.

Another importance element of the professional context of ECEC practitioner preparation is the way in which the ECEC practitioner is viewed, particularly from within its own community. If we are to examine the notion of community in terms of 'common identity', as previously

mentioned, then issues such as professional status and standing, working conditions, training and qualifications need to be discussed and reflected upon also. These issues lead to disparity within the sector, further complicating practices within the field and complicating the way in which the practitioner reflects upon practices as well as personal identity as an effective practitioner.

Within the personal context, the notion of community is seen as a state of mind, rather than something tangible. It is more than a place. It is an acknowledgement of involvement, engagement as well as interdependence. There is an acceptance that despite community being a social concept, it is utterly dependent on the individual person. It is not sameness, but interlocking diversity, respect for specialisation. It's unity is that of diversity in which an arena of action is created. Therefore, "community is never static, always negotiated, shifting and adjusting its principles of order, but always mine and ours, mine to belong to, ours to be ourselves" (O'Farrell, 1994, p.18). In order to actively engage within the ECEC community, the future practitioner may be better equipped, if aware of and able to engage in the various phases of critical reflection. This project is an endeavour to evaluate these conceptions from the student's perspectives.

Outline of the research project

The central research question of this study is:

What are the qualitatively different ways in which Human Service/Child and family undergraduates understand reflective practice?

In order to pursue this question, the study will also focus on the following subsidiary questions:

1. What are student conceptions of being a reflective ECEC practitioner?
2. What does it mean for you to be "prepared" as a reflective ECEC practitioner?

The focus of the study is the qualitatively different conceptions of reflective ECEC practitioner preparation, held by the Bachelor of Human Services (Child and Families) students at Griffith University.

In any research that is undertaken, it is the nature of the research questions, as well as the purpose of the research, that determines the choice of methodology to be used in the study (Bowden, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This study is concerned with more than simply students describing ECEC reflective practices. Rather, this study is about describing how students understand their preparation as reflective ECEC practitioners, and as such, phenomenography, as a theoretical approach and a methodology, will be used to frame the study. Phenomenography is presented as a useful methodology in eliciting students' understandings of reflective practitioner preparation for working in ECEC services with young children and their families.

Phenomenography aims to reveal and investigate the different ways in which people experience phenomena in the world around them (Bruce, 1996; Dahlgren, 1993; Dall'Alba, 1996; Marton, 1996; Pramling, 1995). This study aims to uncover the variation in the way a particular group of students understand their preparation as ECEC practitioners, and does not try to impose a pre-set interpretation of ECEC practitioners. A phenomenographic research approach offers an insider perspective of ECEC practitioner preparation. The desire to obtain an "insider view", or as Marton (1981) describes, a "second-order perspective" (p.178), distinguishes this particular study from earlier research of ECEC practitioner preparation. The phenomenographic approach adopted in this study supports a deep approach to understanding the situated experiences of ECEC practice by students in this double degree program. The selection of phenomenography, as the methodology for this study, is based on its "goodness of fit" (Marton, 1981), as well as its appropriateness to the object of inquiry.

It is anticipated that the findings of this study will contribute significantly to the development of knowledge in the area of ECEC reflective

practitioner preparation programs at this university. Such a focus may lead towards a reconceptualisation of this, as well as other, reflective ECEC practitioner degree programs. The findings may guide future policy and practice reforms within the wider early childhood field, and may be of particular use to other undergraduate ECEC programs, in their attempts to enhance/improve the programs that are established for access by students seeking to work as reflective practitioners, with young children and their families.

In this particular study, the design is based upon a group of students and their relationship to the phenomenon of reflective practitioner preparation for working in ECEC services. Furthermore, the study concentrates on these conceptions from the viewpoint of the student, rather than those of the ECEC services, policy makers or university academics, within the sector. Svensson (1984) contends that the delimitation of the phenomenon to be investigated is crucial for the whole design of an investigation. He argues that "phenomena always exist in a context and they may be delimited in different ways, in relation to this context" (p.5). Unlike other qualitative approaches to research, which focus on capturing the full richness of experience, phenomenography aims at reaching a very specific level of description.

It follows, then, that the results of phenomenographic research can help to make the participants of the study, in particular, and the group under investigation, in general, "aware of this variation, its structure and relevance as part of the process of helping them experience the world in a different way" (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997, p.42). An intended outcome of this study is to inform early childhood academics of student conceptions and by expanding the awareness of academics and other professionals in the ECEC field to the variation that exists in the way that students conceptualise reflective early childhood practice and their role within.

This study assumes that the phenomenon, of a reflective ECEC practitioner, can be understood by students in a number of ways. The aim of the present research is to identify and describe, on equal terms,

the conceptions that students have of reflective early childhood practice. The underlying value of phenomenography as a research approach lies in its ability to make transparent these different conceptions of reflective practice and the ways in which students understand critical reflection.

Conceptions do not reside within the individuals (Saljo, 1988); they represent a particular way of viewing, thinking about and interpreting an aspect of the world. Bowden (1994) contends that the central concern of phenomenographers is not with the phenomenon being investigated, nor with the people who are experiencing the phenomenon. Rather, phenomenographers focus upon the relation between the two and the ways people experience or think about the phenomenon. The central concern of this phenomenographic study is not just the phenomenon of reflective early childhood practices being investigated, nor with the students who choose to practice in early childhood services. Rather, it is concerned with the relation between the two.

Theoretical assumptions adopted in this study align with Svensson's (1997) theoretical foundations of phenomenography, in which it is assumed that:

- knowledge has a relational and holistic nature;
- conceptions are the central form of knowledge;
- scientific knowledge about conceptions (and generally) is ... uncertain;
- descriptions are fundamental to scientific knowledge and about conceptions (and generally);
- scientific knowledge about conceptions is based on exploration of delimitations and holistic meanings of objects as conceptualised; and
- scientific knowledge about conceptions (and generally) is based on differentiation, abstraction, reduction and comparison of meaning (Svensson, 1997, p.171).

According to Marton (1996), variation is central to phenomenographic research. For each phenomenon, principle or aspect of reality, there seems to exist a limited number of qualitatively different conceptions of that phenomenon, principle, or aspect of reality (Dahlgren, 1993). Marton (1997) maintains that describing the variation between conceptions is the most powerful instrument in analysing phenomenographic data. He proposes that:

Once we have data collected about people's ways of experiencing a certain phenomenon, that which varies can be discerned. Variation is the object of research, at the same time it is the main vehicle of research (Marton, 1997, p.4).

Thus, in this study, students' conceptions of ECEC reflective practices are considered central to the manner in which students apply their beliefs to their work as ECEC practitioners. In arriving at the students' conceptions of reflective early childhood practice, this study assumes that conceptions may be revealed through eliciting rich descriptions from the research participants, of the phenomenon of reflective ECEC practitioners.

In order to elicit the fullest possible meaning from the research data, it is essential that the nature of the phenomenographic processes are clarified. These include: identification of conceptions, categories of description and the outcome space. They are all distinctive features of phenomenography. This research will follow a well-established tradition in qualitative research, of working with smaller numbers of participants to explore the interview data in more depth. The participants will be purposively selected on the basis of being representative of the cohort of Bachelor of Human Services/ Child and Family students who are at the end of their second year in the degree program.

The understandings of reflective practitioner preparation for work in ECEC services that emerge as a result of this study are held by a particular group of students, who are located within a degree program within a specific demographic location. If this research were to take place in

another university, then the construction of a different set of categories of description depicting students' varying conceptions of ECEC reflective practitioners is possible. It is argued that the results of this study are not generalisable. However, these findings may highlight perspectives and possibilities for other like universities or communities.

Conclusion

Thus, the *Reflective practitioner study*, as previously outlined, will continue, with the collection of data, followed by subsequent analysis. This interpretation may then be used to inform future program reform within the Bachelor of Human Services/Child and Family, whilst at the same time, adding to discussions in the wider ECEC field in relation to practitioner preparation. Birrell (1994 states, "what should unite a university as a community... is a *telos*, an end or purpose" (p.102). When applied to the topic at hand, that being the preparation of graduates to work with young children and their families across the vast community sector of early childhood education and care (ECEC), the common end or purpose is the acquisition and communication of knowledge.

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