Early childhood teachers making sense of their work
in child care

(previous title: Teachers’ work in the child care centres of the 1990s)

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Abstract

The following paper is based on a pilot study undertaken in 1997. This pilot is part of a larger study which will become a doctoral thesis.

My doctoral thesis seeks to generate theory grounded in empirical evidence of what it is like to be a teacher in an Australian child care centre and to produce knowledge that can inform courses designed to prepare and support teachers who work in child care.

The child care industry is undergoing enormous growth and there is an increasing demand for trained early childhood teachers to work as centre directors and preschool teachers. Greater knowledge is required about what teachers are expected to do as part of their work in the child care workplace and about what teachers need to know in order to meet the challenges of their work.

A pilot study involving a twelve week professional development program for six early childhood teachers working in child care has been completed and informs the proposals for research contained in this paper. The pilot is expected to become the first of a series of three collaborative inquiries that aim to study teachers’ knowledge which is grounded in their experiences at work. Exploring with teachers how they make sense of their experiences, their teaching context and themselves-as-teachers is at the heart of the research.
The teachers involved in the pilot study, Sandy, Brooke, Joy, Trish, Julie, and Linda, examined teaching situations in order to surface the knowledge which guided their actions. Reflection encouraged these teachers to consider the ways past experiences, present circumstances and visions for the future influenced their images of self-as-teacher and teaching actions. Their involvement led to personally beneficial outcomes, helping them to better understand their work and their responses to teaching situations.

The research is designed to ensure each of the three programs build on the other, inform each other and provide a progressive focus for what comes next. The findings from the pilot study have now provided a rich source of information about what it is like to work as an early childhood teacher in child care. A prevalent theme in the teacher stories, which may warrant further exploration in the subsequent inquiries, involves knowledge needs related to interpersonal relationships and interactions with children, families, colleagues and management.

**Overall Aims of the Research Investigation**

The larger research investigation of which the pilot study is a part aims to:

1. Construct a theory of practice that is grounded in the ways teachers working in child care centres make sense of their experiences, their teaching context and themselves as teachers.

2. Generate new insights into what it is like to work as an early childhood teacher in a child care centre, and

3. Identify how teacher education courses might better prepare and support teachers who gain employment in this sector of early childhood education.

In the first stage of my doctoral program, a literature on teachers’ work and early childhood teaching contexts was reviewed. An interpretive research design embracing reflection and collaborative inquiry was developed and a pilot study undertaken to further develop the data collection and analysis methods.
In order to orientate the reader to the data that will become the basis for theory building in this research, one story from the pilot study is presented in this paper.

A preview: Sandy’s story....

**Sandy’s story**

Sandy is working as Director/Teacher in a child care centre on the outskirts of Brisbane. Consider this story about what is it like to be a teacher working in a child care centre...

**Children like Nicholas: Sandy’s dilemma**

During the pilot, Sandy's conversations about her work centred upon a child named Nicholas. The pilot program gave Sandy an opportunity to share her experiences with other professionals, receive emotional support, and identify what she needed to know more about in order to deal with the challenges offered by Nicholas and his complex family situation.

When I visited Sandy's centre, the first person I met was Nicholas, who greeted me enthusiastically. Sandy had told the children a visitor called Alison was coming. I had barely stuck my head around the door when Nicholas came running, arms open wide, calling "ALISON". After being hugged and squeezed like a long lost friend Nicholas stuck with me like a limpet sticks to its favourite rock. He grabbed my hand, plopped onto my lap, wanted me to read a book, wanted to show me everything. He showered me with a demonstration of affection and attention the whole time I was there.

In an early journal entry, Sandy began "Nicholas is a little boy with huge bad behaviour." Psychologists are involved at home and at the centre because of his sad history. He had been starved as an infant and lost half his body birth weight before being adopted. Two weeks before arriving at Sandy's centre, Nicholas was living in a grass hut in a village in Fiji. Suddenly, he found himself in a completely new environment with a new mother, and long days at a child care centre. His single white aunt, now "mother", has also found this adjustment a challenge. While talking to centre staff she has been reduced to
tears explaining that she cannot cope with his behaviour and doesn't know what to do to improve the situation.

The struggle

Describing the dilemmas of a particularly awful week Sandy wrote: He (Nicholas) had been running, screaming, basically ignoring me all week, running out the front door and banging the gate and screaming - not wanting to get out, just creating a scene. So I eventually lost my temper with Nicholas and as I was talking loudly (yelling) at him his mum walked in. She looked absolutely crushed and disappointed. My immediate reaction was "Oh great! Now she's going to think I scream at him all day." So I went to her to explain what had been happening in Nicholas's day. She began to cry... Would I have felt so bad if his mum had not walked in at that particular moment and cried? Yes, probably because the behaviour and lack of improvement is really starting to get to me!

After this incident Nicholas's mum handed Sandy a letter which she had written for the child psychologist. It detailed Nicholas's life history. Reading this information caused Sandy much distress. It showed her that there were many complex reasons for Nicholas's behaviour and she told herself to have PATIENCE. Sandy realised that she was able to give Nicholas back at the end of the day and that the mother has him all the time - without resources. She also realised she needed more knowledge - how to deal with ADD children, how malnutrition affects children and their development in the long term, and how to help Nicholas and his mother adjust to their new situation.

Erosion

Following this incident Sandy reflected on her feelings: Sometimes I feel like an island. Years come and children come to visit a while, have the fun they can, and learn what the can then they leave again - like tourists. The island (me) is providing as much for them as possible while they are there. Part of the island is being eroded by wind, ocean etc - like how I feel when I cannot do much for a particular child - I'm being worn out. Of course the other side of the island has a resort where people are having a great time and are completely unaware of how the other side of the island is being worn away. Even though the island has solid foundations and is not going anywhere despite cyclones and bad weather something must be done about the eroding section or in time it will all wear away.
Sandy thinks this metaphor is relevant because of the stress she has had with Nicholas and other children who also have complicated family backgrounds. Sandy has many children who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and who do not have a family that constitute society's family "norm". She has learned to never assume that the adult who brings a child to the centre is the parent or even the custodian.

When Nicholas 'plays up', these other children seem to respond by also misbehaving, creating what Sandy describes as a very unpleasant environment. In her reflective writing she wonders if she needs a break from children.

**Stress as a consequence**

During discussions Sandy shared how the situation with Nicholas has affected her deeply - to such an extent that people around her have been commenting on the change they see in her. Instead of being vibrant and enthusiastic about her job, she has been quiet, preoccupied, "stressed out". She can feel her body carrying the weight of her stress and wonders what she can do to make her work less stressful. This is the first time in her teaching life that she has felt like this. Sandy is twenty five years old and has been teaching preschool aged children in this particular centre for four years, since graduating.

**Responsibility Vs Confidence**

After listening to the dilemmas of others during the pilot program, Sandy started to wonder if her dilemmas were really that bad. Brooke (another teacher involved in the program) had shared her work dilemmas involving a child with difficult behaviour and difficult subsequent parental interactions. Sandy felt "lucky" to have an owner who puts herself in the "firing line" of parents with concerns. The owner usually deals with conflict situations. Whilst feeling "lucky", Sandy feels unsure about her own capabilities. The owner of her centre, which has been established for eleven years in a poorer area just outside of Brisbane, works in an office adjoining the preschool room. The owner oversees the management of the centre in terms of staffing, funding, parent relations and family issues. Sandy does not feel confident dealing with these sorts of issues as she feels she has no experience. She is happy to let the owner take responsibility for these things. The flip side of this is that Sandy does not feel she could successfully apply for a director position at another centre, and so her lack of experience and confidence limits her consideration of other job prospects. She writes: I think when I hear the problems other directors have I don't know if I'm capable of dealing with these
because (the owner) has always done this. I think it is a confidence issue because of the role the owner has in the centre. I feel more like just the teacher rather than director. Won't other centres want a four year trained teacher to take on additional responsibilities?

Each teacher in the pilot group has shared that they have children with complicated lives and problems attending their centres. These teachers are having to work with children and families who have very different experiences from their own and who live extremely complicated lives. The knowledge needs and skills required by teachers move way beyond knowing how to plan and implement exciting programs. Sandy reflected: To know that other teaching/non-teaching directors experience the same problems as me certainly eliminates the feeling of isolation. Many dilemmas which have been spoken about can generally be considered "people problems" - Whether they stem from problems with staff, parents/family members, children, or employers. At first, one would not think that a teacher's dilemmas would result from these relationships/interactions - but (think) instead (that dilemmas) would result from planning, implementation and evaluation of curriculum. Wrong! This is the easy part. Learning and teaching can only occur in an environment which is conducive to this, and for an environment to be harmonious, interactions and relationships need to be positive. Establishing and maintaining these relationships requires many skills and I feel university courses need to address subjects which aim to develop these skills in future child care teachers.

An added pressure: Child care as a business

Family complexities can lead to consequences which affect the centre as a business. Sandy believes it is bad if the situation results in a family leaving the centre - as in Brooke's case - because it may generate negative community perceptions of the centre. If the attendance drops, staff hours are cut back - so Sandy believes that it is important to maintain good relationships with parents for the practical reason of job security. Sandy already has to accept the reality that she has parents who take their child out of her program so that they can attend the local preschool. Doing this is cheaper for the parents because preschool is free, but it also because "day care" is perceived differently - not deemed to be educational. The centre is only 75% full, the owner is recently divorced and the centre is her only livelihood. Relief staff and new equipment are not on the agenda and a preschool teacher's wage takes a big slice of the budget. Many centres in the area are less than 80% full and so competition amongst local centres is rife.
Replenishing time

In subsequent reflections Sandy considered the issue of who is responsible for keeping attendance numbers up and revisited her "erosion" metaphor - stress which gradually leads to teacher burnout. She sees burnout as being prevalent in child care because of the extra responsibilities (like attendance quotas), long hours, limited holidays and award conditions. After two consecutive long weekends Sandy reflected that this time-out enabled her to feel better about her work and she seemed to have more energy to cope with Nicholas. She considers that perhaps if she had regular holidays her energy levels would be replenished. Because her award does not allow for this break she believes that she must keep physically and mentally strong in order to deal with these feelings of burnout. All other education areas where adults work with children have rest times throughout the year to regroup thoughts and refocus. Teachers in child care work a week, and then a week, and then another week, and then another week, ahhhhh - public holiday, then week, after week, after week. It is a big thing to have a public holiday. She drew these diagrams to illustrate:

Figure 1: No time in child care to replenish resources (Sandy)

- Recognition revitalises

A psychologist came to the centre to observe a child she is working with and at the end of her observation time she had a long talk with Sandy. She mentioned the behaviour of several children and congratulated Sandy on how she worked with "an obviously very difficult group of children". This acknowledgment did wonders for Sandy. She felt better about her strategies and was glad that her hard work was being recognised.

Public perception - Professional? or Baby-sitter?

Sandy says that it doesn't take much to encourage her - acknowledgment is important. Being involved in the pilot study has been beneficial for her: In a way it helps me feel like a professional, which brings up the subject of teacher recognition in child care. To know that others feel the same as me is also a comfort. Child care teachers could be seen by those working in the public sector as having a "bee under their bonnet" - why one might wonder? I think what it boils down to is the vast differences in conditions of employment and the old community view that state preschools "teach" and child care centres "look after". Therefore preschools, and by association their teachers, are regarded more highly and are seen to do a better job. We child care teachers studied the same subjects, went to the same universities and work as hard - if not harder due to contact hours - as our public sector colleagues so it seems extremely unfair to be regarded as "baby-sitters" by the wider community.
"Keeping the Peace": An image shaping Sandy's action

Sandy's own experiences as a family member have been different from the children she teaches - she has come from a stable nuclear family and feels that she doesn't know what to say or how to deal with family problems. I don't feel confident about having to deal with these issues and have had no previous experience with these types of problems. When thinking about my training and the dilemmas I face "families" aren't covered enough. My first reaction is to be aghast and then I go to my owner for advice.

Her family experiences enter into her images of teaching which guide her actions. Sandy sees that her role as teacher is to keep happy and to keep the peace. (I believe) all interactions with people (staff, parents, children, community) need to be polite/positive so that the overall day can run smoothly and all people in the work environment feel positive and happy about the day.

Figure 2: Sandy's drawing of self-as-teacher

Perhaps part of her feelings about Nicholas and his behaviour relate to the disruption of "the peace" and to people including herself, Nicholas and his mother, not feeling positive and happy in a smooth running day. Generally, Sandy has a strategy for dealing with children where she imagines that the child's mother is listening or standing there as she is talking to the child. This strategy helps Sandy remain calm and to use a nice tone of voice and consider the sort of action to take. On the day she lost her cool with Nicholas, the frustration of the moment caught up with her and she raised her voice. She felt badly that she didn't respond according to her ideal, especially because Nicholas's mother WAS standing there!

Sandy also relates her valuing of "peace" to her family upbringing: My mum has devoted her life to the family peace keeping process and as a result I value calm, happy environments where people can reach full potential in a stress free environment - staff and children. It is also related to her own experiences as a child: I was a very sensitive child and I guess this is why it was so important for me to please people and do what was expected - keeping everyone happy - in retrospect this is what I was doing and still today I am the same - can't let my employer down, the parents, children, family, friends.

Sandy feels that it is important to really get to know the children and their families and by understanding the needs, wants and interests of the children she is then able to plan more appropriately for them. She also likes to think of herself as a friend of the children and believes that when there is a
mutual respect between teacher and child, discipline of children is slightly easier.

Sandy loved her teachers throughout her preschool and primary school life and she feels that these positive relationships gave her a desire to be an early childhood teacher. Her feelings and images of her early schooling are all positive.

Something that Sandy also sees as contributing to her development as a teacher was her younger sister's learning difficulties: I saw a young child struggle all through school, in class, with homework, teachers dealing with her, or NOT dealing with her. (Through) seeing this struggle, which was as bad for mum as it was my sister, I came to understand that children with problems need to be dealt with, helped and extra guidance recommended - not just forgotten about or passed on to another teacher, kindy, school etc. I as a teacher need to know my limitations about how much I can do for a child before calling in support services and getting help for the child.

Professional development - anti-erosion

The pilot study gave Sandy an opportunity to move out of isolation and talk with other teachers. The program encouraged Sandy because she felt like a professional again and she felt valued as an early childhood teacher. In terms of understanding her teaching context and self-as-teacher, the program encouraged her to reflect on the dilemma she faced with Nicholas, his behaviour, and complex family situation. She was then able to uncover other contributing factors to this dilemma - her need for recognition and acknowledgment, community perceptions of her work, the contribution of her own experiences and ideals, the physical and emotional consequences of this complex situation, and her specific knowledge needs. Sandy still meets with the two of the teachers from the pilot study group and values the friendship and support that this network provides. Realising that she does need a break from teaching in this setting, Sandy is resigning at the end of this year and taking a year off to travel around the world.

The reader may now be asking how Sandy’s experiences differ from those faced by teachers in other settings. Concerns about how to deal with behaviour management and feelings of inadequacy are common amongst teachers (Bullough, 1989).

Why then is it important to know what working in child care is like for Sandy and teachers like her?
The importance of Sandy's story

It is clear that Sandy's work as teacher in child care involves many, perhaps unique, challenges. The mother in this real world story is relying on Sandy for support and coping strategies. Nicholas is in full-time care all day everyday. Particular knowledge is required by Sandy in order to meet Nicholas's needs: knowledge about behaviour management techniques, about Attention Deficit Disorders, about the long term effects of malnutrition, about coping with stress.

The other teachers in the group also had specific knowledge needs - about the legal system, computer packages, budgets, business management, etc. Hundreds of other specific knowledge needs could be added to the list, and it may well be impossible for courses to address every one of these specific needs.

Perhaps the greater challenge lies with unpacking knowledge needs at a deeper level: knowledge and skills of an interpersonal kind, about working with people, communicating effectively, being assertive, and managing difficult relationships and interactions. The findings of the pilot study indicate that further investigation is warranted. This may well be an important direction to explore with subsequent groups of teachers.

The quality of children’s experiences is inextricably tied to the teachers’ experiences (Brand, 1990). The teachers involved in the pilot were called upon to fulfil many roles and the business nature of the industry brought additional concerns to their working lives. Some of the teachers felt they were being asked to consider these concerns above the needs of children.

Providing students with information about how teachers working in child care are influenced by, and respond to, aspects of their work such as management and organisational practices, working conditions, policy implementation, levels of social support, and communication, may encourage more realistic expectations and assist students to gather more relevant skills for coping with the typical demands on teachers in the child care workplace. The stories told by the teachers during the professional development program indicate that they are ill-informed about some of these aspects and about the awards and conditions of their work.
What knowledge and experiences are teachers drawing on when they take action in dilemma situations? Past experiences and images of teaching shape the ways teachers respond to situations requiring immediate action. Within this pilot, the examination and uncovering of images and past experiences as they related to specific incidents showed potential power for gaining access to teachers' knowledge needs.

Although university-based early childhood courses provide student teachers with practical experience in child care centres, not enough is known about how students and teachers deal with demands faced in everyday teaching experiences. Knowledge needs and work demands are no longer bound to program planning and implementation, yet this aspect of teachers' work continues to be the predominate, almost exclusive, focus in tertiary courses (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1997).

Awareness of work dilemmas by tertiary institutions is necessary in order to provide students with the sorts of skills and knowledge needed to meet the special demands of their work. During the pilot, each teacher described situations that were complex and dramatic, highlighting the reality that teachers' work in child care centres of the 1990s is extremely complicated.

Developing a Conceptual Framework for the Doctoral Study

A rich source of information about what it is like to work as a teacher in a child care centre was provided by the teacher stories gathered during the pilot. Analysis and re-analysis of these has shaped the conceptual framework for the research. Figure 3. has been helpful in conceptualising the framework to be used in the research.

Early childhood teachers making sense of their work

The teacher stories generated during the pilot highlight the value of focussing on particular situations to access knowledge which informs action. There is value in studying teacher knowledge which is grounded in experiences at work (Carter, 1990). This knowledge which the teacher holds and actively uses has been termed 'personal practical knowledge' (Clandinin, 1983). The actions teachers take are influenced by their images of teaching, their life histories, and past experiences, which are part of their personal practical knowledge.
Because this knowledge is tacit, teachers draw on this knowledge automatically and unconsciously. Research on reflective practice looks carefully at the ways teachers make sense of and learn from their everyday experiences in the classroom. Engaging in reflective practice implies that one considers not only one’s actions and its consequences, but the beliefs, values and other knowledge which contributed to motivating and creating a rationale for that action (Briscoe, 1996).

Early childhood teachers making sense of their teaching context

Child care centres are places where many early childhood teachers are now employed. Centre-based child care is characterised by the long day for which children attend, with many children attending centres for more than ten hours a day. Teachers work under a different award and experience different working conditions from other teachers. The constancy of work in child care, isolation from other teachers, tiredness and depleted energy levels must also be understood as these impact on emotional resources.

During the pilot, the influence of the broad environmental issues on teachers' experiences of their work in child care, such as the social, political, economic, industrial and organisational contexts were communicated strongly in teacher reflections. So too was the impact of poor pay and working conditions on teacher attitudes and energy. A deeper understanding of how these factors relate to teachers' knowledge needs is therefore all the more urgent. The stories shared by teachers during the pilot highlight that is essential for teacher educators to attend more carefully to the contextual matters of teachers work and to associated knowledge needs.

Early childhood teachers making sense of themselves as teachers

Examining images that guide teaching action assists in understanding teachers’ knowledge needs. The pilot provided an opportunity for teachers to reflect and gain new awareness of their personal practical knowledge and the enduring images which guide their practice.

For Elbaz (1983, p.5) practical knowledge is oriented to practical situations and includes first hand experiences, interests, needs, strengths, skills, knowledge of the social structure of the teaching context, and personal values and beliefs. It is held in an active relationship to practice and used in dynamic ways to give shape to practice.

Elbaz (1983) uses the construct of image to give an account of practical knowledge where the teacher holds and actively uses knowledge to shape
the work situation and guide the practice of teaching. Clandinin's (1983) work enlarged on these concepts of practical knowledge and image to link knowledge to past experiences, and to current and ongoing practices. Through reflection, teachers can surface and examine their history and understandings using image as a framework for organising these. This view sees teachers as knowing beings who continually construct and reconstruct knowledge to represent experience (Olson, 1995). The term 'personal practical knowledge' is about understanding teaching action in terms of personalised concrete accounts of people knowing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, p.16).

Eisner (1992) has noted that there is much that we know how to do for which we have tacit rather than theoretical knowledge. Tacit knowledge is intuitive, personal, experiential and often secured in the context of action. Tacit knowledge depends upon having direct experiences with the phenomena and enables teachers to make effective decisions ‘in flight’ (Polanyi, 1967).

The importance of tacit knowledge has encouraged researchers to use stories as a way of understanding what knowledge teachers use when they take action. Eisner (1995) sees narratives as increasingly important, because stories get at forms of understanding that cannot be reduced to measurement or to scientific explanation. Stories are resources that teachers can use to improve their own teaching and are sources of understanding teaching for researchers.

The significance of dilemma situations

Lampert (1985, p.190) has aptly portrayed the teacher as a broker of contradictory interests, someone who ‘builds a working identity that is constructively ambiguous’, a dilemma manager. Elbaz (1983) also suggests that teachers confront a variety of dilemmas in their work and they draw on their practical knowledge whilst trying to manage dilemmas. Dilemmas arise when there is conflict between the work context and the images which guide and shape teachers’ actions.

In order to understand and learn from the stories they tell, teachers need to be encouraged to pay attention to what they find problematic in their work, to the dilemmas they face. Olson (1995, p.133) terms this as ‘staying awake to the stories being constructed’. As knowledge is accumulated it becomes easier to ‘fall asleep’ to new possibilities, it becomes easier for knowledge to become habitual (Greene, 1988). By examining specific dilemmas situations, explicit knowledge can be brought to the awareness of teachers, together with the awareness of how that knowledge has been acquired. As this is surfaced, the opportunities for coming to new understandings of the stories teachers live and tell is possible. This in turn may open possibilities for
teachers to teach in better ways than they were taught and to author their lives as knowledgeable professionals (Olson, 1995).

The child care context offers many challenges. Some of these conditions may be difficult to change and strategies for managing dilemmas may not be easily found due to external constraints. For the teachers involved in the pilot study, there were no guarantees that the dilemmas would disappear or easy solutions found, however the teachers found renewed energy and insight in coping with their work situations. Feelings of empowerment and greater understanding of self-as-teacher were the outcomes, assisting teachers to deal more knowledgeably with their work dilemmas.

Figure 3: A framework for examining dilemma situations

Questions Emerging from the Pilot Study

• How do teachers working in child care make sense of their work, their teaching context and themselves as teachers?

• What events and situations do teachers identify in their day to day work where dilemmas seriously impact on their teaching action?

• What are the knowledge needs of teachers working in child care centres?

In order to answer these questions, narrative accounts which portray how a teachers’ life history and images of self-as-teacher guide responses to work dilemmas, will be collaboratively collected and assembled.
What assumptions guide this study?

I am very interested in exploring the influence of teachers’ ‘education-related life histories’ when they are deciding action in dilemma situations (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1991). In preparation for my doctoral study, I presented surveys to early childhood students in the subjects I was teaching. In these surveys, third and fourth year students described that their teaching actions during practicum experiences were informed by past experiences - particularly their own schooling, and previous pracs. I explored this idea further with the teachers in the pilot study.

Pinnegar (1995) has emphasised the importance of experience, maintaining that the things teachers know about a context and about teaching become embedded in the experiences they have. Prior knowledge is a foundation on which to explore and build knowledge. Clandinin (1992), and Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1991) suggest that the personal histories and experiences of students should be a beginning point in the work to educate future teachers.

Pinnegar (1995) has investigated the development of ‘teacher schema’: while things she had learned in teacher education, student teaching and beginning teaching had augmented and differentiated aspects of a schema for interacting with students in classroom settings, its roots were clearly connected to her earlier experiences of teaching a group of three year old children in Sunday school when she was only 16 years old.

These kinds of teaching experiences might, more powerfully than anything they learn from teaching courses, form the basis of student teacher schemes. Maitland-Gholson and Ettinger (1994) have also suggested that histories dictate the beliefs, values, ideologies and everyday understandings through which our lived experience is filtered. Readings such as these, and discussion with students has lead me to consider how past experiences influence current practices. An examination of one’s past experiences (or life history) works hand in hand with the notion of uncovering one’s practical knowledge and images of self-as-teacher/images of teaching.

In order to assist the pilot study group in their reflection about their life history, I provided them with a list of questions about their teaching, why they chose teaching, etc. The questions were helpful in assisting teachers to uncover the influences of past experiences and make sense of themselves as teachers. Drawing pictures and diagrams was another useful way of accessing images of teaching and self-as-teacher. This strategy will be employed in future programs with teachers.

After the pilot study group had reflected on and written about their past experiences they seemed more able to embark on the task of probing unreflected meanings about particular situations and describe images or metaphors about themselves as teachers. For example, Sandy’s actions were influences by her valued images of
‘teacher as keeping the peace’ and she experienced conflict when ‘peace’ was disrupted. When Nicholas was running around the centre screaming and banging gates, her peace was disrupted. Her younger sister’s struggles at school also influenced how she perceived how much she could and should do for children with special needs.

The capacity to meet the external demands of teaching may be dependent upon maturity, experience, energy levels and confidence. However, past experiences are the source of skills and knowledge, and condition the degree of confidence teachers bring to their work situation. Examining past experiences and their influence on current action is therefore very important in gaining an understanding of the images which inform what teachers do. In her journal, Sandy wrote The pilot study made me reflect on the information I use which guides many of my decisions and actions/reactions. It was interesting within the group that the base from which we worked developed from our own childhood experiences and that the university study was used or discarded on the basis of beliefs and feelings which had been preconceived before enrolling at uni.

The research approach

The pilot confirmed that teachers in child care want to meet and talk with other teachers and are willing to become involved in professional development outside of their work hours to do this. The opportunity to be involved in this program was welcomed. The research approach of the major study seeks to build on the strategies used during the pilot, and on the information gained as a result of this first study.

Initially, I set out to work with teachers to examine clearly defined dilemmas related to behaviour management of children in their programs. It became apparent at the first meeting that this was limiting what teachers were wanting to talk about. Listening to teachers enabled me to get more of an insider perspective and I discovered that their work dilemmas were complicated, unique, difficult and dramatic. The information teachers shared during the pilot raises many questions and highlights that the knowledge needed to manage their work demands is far more involved than planning and implementing developmentally appropriate programs for young children.

As stated earlier, examination of the teacher stories has uncovered an enduring thread woven throughout each story about interpersonal relationships and knowledge needs related to working with people. This information will be considered further during the next phase of the research inquiry.
The approach of the doctoral study is to continue using the mechanism of a professional development program to uncover the knowledge needs of teachers working in child care and to develop theory that is grounded in the ways teachers make sense of their work in this setting. The pilot study will inform the next study group and the second study group will inform the third. Each group will evolve from the previous one while enriching the next. The doctoral research will draw on and revisit the information gained from each of the three study groups.

From the range of stories collected, typical dilemmas and issues about what working in child care is like may be identified. Saturation in the data may be necessary. Alternatively, a progressive focus which leads to an investigation of particular needs such as those of an interpersonal nature may eventuate. Because the direction the research will take is not yet known, emerging questions may be different for the second and third studies.

An overview of the pilot study

- 6 teachers who graduated in the 1990s and currently work as a teacher in a child care centre
- a professional development program: 12 weeks duration
- one visit by the researcher to each teacher's workplace at the commencement of the program
- 6 group discussion evenings - one a fortnight (2 hour sessions)
- weekly journal writing - reflecting on specific situations, identifying practical knowledge and images which guide teaching action
- writing an education-related life history and reflecting on how this informs current work practices and action
- using drawings and diagrams to convey images of teaching and teaching dilemmas
- collaborative contribution to a professional journal - combining voices to describe what working in child care is like and to communicate to a wider audience of teachers

The development of the pilot study

The twelve week professional development program began with seven teachers working in privately owned child care centres in Brisbane. These teachers had responded to a survey sent out by the School of Early Childhood QUT on work history and indicated their willingness to be involved in further discussion. Teachers were contacted by phone and agreed to participate in the program. This data source will be used again to contact interested teachers.

At the commencement of the program I visited each teacher at their work place. This gave me an introduction to the teachers and their work environment. During the visit the teachers were able to give me feedback about what they hoped to gain from being involved in the professional development program and share something of their work with me. I found that my visit to each teacher at their centre really assisted the ‘bonding/trusting’ process. During subsequent group discussions, teachers would refer to my visit to support their descriptions
of their workplace and work experiences. As a listener I was also better able to understand what teachers were describing about their work and working environment.

The size of the group encouraged friendly discussion and conversation flowed easily. We established in the second session what our shared agenda for the professional development program would be. This was very important as it served as a firm foundation for what was to follow and encouraged a commitment and shared rationale for our time together. Goodson and Fliesser (1995) believe that for a working relationship to develop into a collaborative one, all parties must have mutual respect and trust, which is built upon understanding the complexities and intricacies of each other’s worlds and roles. They raise the notion of the importance of ‘fair trade’ where participants negotiate their roles and relationships by addressing what they are willing to offer to the research project and what they wish to get out of their involvement in the project (Goodson & Fliesser, 1995, p.7).

Attendance at the six evening sessions varied, from two teachers to full participation. When teachers missed a session I sent them a tape of the discussion and they continued weekly journal reflection. In between meetings I would send a letter to teachers. This letter served as a focusing device to assist reflection on the previous week, on the images and metaphors of teaching which guided action, and on the emphasis of the coming week’s program. Teachers found these letters helpful and were pleased to know that I was listening to their stories about working in child care and also ‘putting in some work’ while they maintained written reflections.

As mentioned earlier, I set out to explore the knowledge teachers were acting on when they dealt with dilemma situations with children. There were many complex situations that these teachers were dealing with in their everyday working lives and these involved not only children but parents, staff, management and owners. Because of this, I needed to ensure that teachers felt able to share and reflect on the particular dilemmas that they faced in their individual work places. So that the professional development remained meaningful for every teacher a wider focus than dilemmas with children was needed. Goodson and Fliesser (1995) believe that collaborative relationships are enhanced when researchers respond to teachers’ interests and needs and negotiate and renegotiate roles throughout the dynamic process of a research project.

Allowing teachers to share what was important to them was part of the collaborative uncovering of what working in child care is like. While some dilemma situations assisted the identification of practical knowledge, the incredible complexity of situations made the teasing out of this knowledge quite difficult. The dilemma situations highlighted that teachers require specific knowledge to meet work demands. As each teacher’s experience and role as teacher was different, so too the types of knowledge needed to cope with work demands varied. As well as this, the stories teachers shared with each other uncovered commonly accepted hidden norms of working in child care. This commonality enabled teachers to feel less isolated in their work and helped them to understand their individual workplaces within the context of other centres. The teachers were also able to come to agreements about the most useful way to think about the issues and dilemmas they faced in their work. Having a safe place to vent frustrations and unwind was also valued.
Two of the teachers in the study were non-contact directors. The dilemmas they shared related to the management issues they faced in their work. These teachers (Linda and Joy) found that although they used their knowledge of working with children in their work, it was to a lesser degree than when they had had responsibility for a particular group of children. Linda found that her knowledge needs were related to computer packages, dealing with parents, communicating staff issues to owners, and communicating owner expectations to staff. When I spoke to the owner of Linda’s centre, he communicated that he did not value her degree in early childhood education or her knowledge of child development. Linda too questioned the worth of her time at university.

Keeping a journal encouraged teachers to identify specific dilemma situations they were facing in their work and encouraged deeper reflection about these dilemmas. Examining images, metaphors of self-as-teacher, life history and dilemmas, and using drawings and diagrams to illustrate these, were powerful ways of assisting teachers to surface their knowledge needs and make sense of their work, their teaching context and themselves.

Conversations were tape-recorded, but not transcribed. Tapes were listened to and reviewed and used to write a letter/story of teachers’ experiences. Teachers also reflected on their work and recorded dilemma situations in their weekly journals. During the review process, issues and dilemmas arising out of conversations and journal writing were identified and the stories of individual teachers were summarised. Teachers were asked to comment on their stories and to verify the authenticity of what was written about their work and images of teaching. Teachers also took the opportunity to elaborate on the issues discovered together during the life of the professional development program. Internal accuracy was determined by returning the narrative text of the stories, which represented issues and dilemmas, to the teachers. A process of telling and retelling occurred, where teachers added information and identified how well the narrative reflected their experiences. External accuracy involved comparison of conversational data with written journal and pictorial information and my observations during visits to individual centres.

Drawings and diagrams were used by the teachers to access and illustrate the images they were holding of self-as-teacher and work dilemmas. A summary diagram was used to capture what their work in child care was like.

At the end of the six sessions, four of the teachers met with me and together we wrote an article for an early childhood journal so that our stories could reach a wider audience. (It is currently being reviewed for the ECTA journal.) This article communicated what working in child care is like for these teachers. The teachers also outlined the benefits they experienced from being part of the professional development program and from the opportunity to meet and talk to other teachers.
Desirable outcomes for the doctoral study

This research aims to make a number of contributions. Peshkin (1993) has delved into the large and growing literature of qualitative studies and identified a range of possibilities that may be outcomes of qualitative research. He sees the nature of research as a progressive process that gets to the bottom of things and dwells on complexity - research that has a quest for understanding.

The stories provided by the three groups of teachers during collaborative conversations and journal writing will result in greater understanding of the processes of learning and knowing, of personal practical knowledge, of relationships, of the child care setting and every day situations, and of the people, organisations and systems that influence teachers' work in child care.

The research process will assist the elaboration of existing knowledge about learning, develop and refine knowledge, provide insights that change behaviour, and identify problems and knowledge needs. This process will enable clarification and understanding of the complexity of teachers' work in child care and will assist theory development. These interpretations and insights will further knowledge about how tertiary courses and professional development programs can support teachers working in the child care centres of the 1990's and beyond.
References


