Practical Wisdom: Exploring the hidden dimensions of professional practice

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ABSTRACT

Practical wisdom in professional practice requires sound judgement in the use of personal/professional, theoretical, and practical knowledge. Many aspects of such knowledges encompass ‘the invisible elements of practice’ (Fish, 1998). This paper draws on three sources of data to explore the nature of being an early childhood professional. The first source of data is recent reviews of the status and standing of early childhood teachers. The second source is the child care standards found within the revised Quality Improvement and Accreditation System for long day care centres (NCAC). The third source is position descriptions for early childhood teachers/Directors.

Evidence suggests that a contributing factor to low status and morale within the profession may be failure by individual professionals to ‘get inside’ their practice and gain an appreciation of the nature of being a professional. The reflective, affective and experiential qualities found within the hidden dimensions of professional practice are part of the being, living and experiencing that occurs as teachers engage in professional practice. The paper considers that standards of excellence are more likely to be achieved where there is greater acknowledgment of the person-in-the-process.

Children’s services throughout Australia that provide care and education for children of below school age have recently experienced considerable difficulty in attracting and retaining early childhood professionals to work within those services. While a relatively large number of graduates exit university with four-year early childhood degrees, many of these graduates choose not to enter the early childhood field or, if they do, remain there for only a short period of time (Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, 2002).

The status and standing of the early childhood profession within Australia

The Status and Standing Working Group of the Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council in its Discussion Paper (Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council, 2001) reported on the low status and low morale of child care workers, the difficulty in recruitment and high staff turnover. The Discussion Paper acknowledged that there is a perception by early childhood professionals that the wider community undervalues and misunderstands their role and level
of expertise (see also comments made in the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy, 2000).

There appear to be three main factors that are contributing to such misunderstandings. The first has been identified both in the Discussion Paper and through the work of Maloney & Barblett (2001) as being the need for national professional standards. In the United States, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2001) has recently updated its standards for teacher preparation and registration. However, the question arises as to what extent do standards imposed from outside, facilitate a sense of professional standing from the inside?

The second factor is the inability of early childhood professionals to clearly articulate those qualities that reflect their work as professionals. The third contributing factor is the reliance on casual and part-time staff - this results in a situation where there is little opportunity for staff to develop an appreciation of the context within which they work. Further to this, there is a national focus on competency standards within a sector of the early childhood field and this has the potential to undermine, amongst other things, the role of reflection in teacher development (OECD, 2000). Where the orientation has moved towards objectivity and impartiality and public confidence has diminished, then professionals begin to feel insecure and develop a sense that the community no longer values their capacity to make professional judgements (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999)

Early childhood professionals do not and can not exist in isolation from the communities within which they practise. These professionals work within relationships (with children and adults) and, within a community and environmental contexts. Indeed, Hayden and MacDonald (2001) strongly argue in support of child care being a service to the community where social relationships are fostered and nurtured. They have a view of early childhood settings being places where links are made to other services within the community for the benefit not only of the child and its family but of the community as a whole.

One of the benefits of such links is the support provided to families in gaining access to community resources and services. In New South Wales, Families First, an initiative of the State Government, endeavours to support a coordinated approach to the provision of services to young children and families through collaborative efforts across departments of health, education, community services and housing as well as ageing and disability. Such a coordinated approach has implications for the role of early childhood professionals and the changing demands placed upon them.

The invisible elements of practice

Early childhood professionals who are involved in working in relationships with adults and children are also involved in 'thinking and acting in complex, contextual and emotional ways' as they engage in these relationships or 'human encounters' (McLean, 1999, p.67). Such engagement requires professionals to integrate professional, intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge in order to establish and maintain effective relationships. Collison (1996) refers collectively to these three forms of knowledge as the triad of knowledge. Professional knowledge may be seen as being objective knowledge in that it is indicative of key understandings required by the profession. However, it may also include practical knowledge encompassing skills that are performed in practice. In early childhood, such knowledge includes knowing about teaching and learning, about curriculum content knowledge, and about children's development and factors influencing this. Knowledge may, therefore, be described as knowing that and knowing how. However, there is a subjective element in the knowing as knowledge is not directly transmitted but interpreted in the
Intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge reflects the subjective side of knowledge as their elements lie within the qualities of the person. Gardner extends this concept of intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge to that of intrapersonal and interpersonal 'intelligences' (Gardner, 1999, p.72). He argues in support of there being, not one but multiple intelligences that reflect multiple ways of knowing, being and understanding. Those who work with young children have already acknowledged important aspects of these intelligences when identifying personal attributes such as responsiveness, reciprocity, respectfulness, trust and an ethical ideal (Goodfellow, 1998). Early childhood professionals may, therefore, be expected to display a range of personal and professional qualities (including particular attitudes and dispositions), in addition to specialised theoretical and practical knowledge, within their professional practice.

For the purposes of this discussion, and within the context of the early childhood educator's work, I describe professional practice as thinking, reflecting and professional judgement enacted through relationships. In this definition I have tried to address the below-the-surface or hidden dimensions of professional practice while paying attention to the human and physical contexts within which early childhood practitioners make decisions (Goodfellow, 2001).

**Professional judgement and practical wisdom**

I use the word judgement within professional practice to capture some of the thoughtfulness and reflective decision making that Fleet (2002) describes when exploring a more critical approach to professional practice. Professional judgement reflects the human qualities within teaching. It contrasts sharply with externally controlled practice where auditing, surveillance and inspection occur in accordance with performance measures that have been decreed by regulation or statutory requirements (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002).

Staff in early childhood centres continually (and often tacitly) make judgements as they engage in their day-to-day practices. Indeed, the AECA Code of Ethics recognises that one of the characteristics of a professional is the ongoing exercise of professional judgement (Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council, 2001; Stonehouse, 1998). These judgements influence the professional's actions. When based on understandings about children, such judgements most often reflect a desire to ensure that professional practices will support the decision making that in turn has the potential to have positive outcomes for children and families. Such judgements are reflected in the artistry of practice and become evident in practical wisdom. Therefore, individual interests, expectations and understandings often form part of the context within which judgements are made.

Artistry, within professional practice, refers to the capacity to act with discernment in unique situations that draw on professional knowledge, practice skills, imagination and the capacity to make critical yet informed judgements pertinent to that situation (Fish, 1998; Higgs & Titchen, 2001). The qualities associated with artistry and hence professional practice may, therefore, be best understood in the context of practice wisdom seen by Higgs and Titchen as

> 'the possession of practice experience and knowledge together with the ability to use them critically, intuitively and practically... these qualities, skills and processes and their blending are built up through extensive introspection and critical reflection, and review of, practice' (Higgs & Titchen, 2001, p.275).
There is a strong association between artistry and wisdom. Elsewhere I have described wisdom as a way of knowing that involves expert knowledge (including personal/professional, theoretical, and practical knowledge) and sound judgement (Goodfellow, 2001). It has reflective, affective, and experiential qualities, as well as a moral/ethical dimension (Fish & Coles, 1998; Sternberg, 1990). While these characteristics lie within the person, practical wisdom combines practical knowledge with sound judgement and thoughtful action (Fish & Coles, 1998; Sternberg, 1990). Practical wisdom is not necessarily content-based, but is associated with ‘the manner in which knowledge is held (and) how that knowledge is put to use’ in exercising judgement (Meacham, in Sternberg, 1990, p.187). The characteristics of practical wisdom also include an ability to learn from ideas and from the environment as well as intuition in being able to see through things, read between the lines and interpret messages gleaned through interactions with social and physical environments.

A metaphor of professional practice

A useful metaphor of professional practice within human services is that of an iceberg (Fish, 1998). Only one third of an iceberg can be seen above the surface. What happens above the surface is the way in which we are as professionals. While some aspects of who we are may be evident in our actions we are also involved in very complex decision making as we go about those actions. The complexity of professional judgement (and factors influencing that judgement) is represented by the two-thirds of the iceberg lie below the surface level of the water in which it floats. If we think about the iceberg in relation to what we do, and the influence that personal qualities such as values and beliefs have on our actions, then we may begin to understand how the two thirds of the iceberg that lie below the surface represent the deeper dimensions or tacitness of our thoughts and actions. Intrapersonal qualities such as feelings, attitudes, beliefs and values influence the early childhood professional's actions and represent the tacit dimensions of professional style or know-how (Goodfellow, 1998). Fish and Coles (1998) suggest that we need to build up the hidden dimensions of our practice if we wish to improve our professional way of being (Heidegger, 1962).

The iceberg is not a fixed image for it changes form as it floats and drifts within a contextual sea of time and place. It is influenced by and, in turn, influences the environment within which it exists. The iceberg of professional practice has dark sides indicative of the unknown, penetrable cracks and crevices, hidden dangers where one may need to take risks and yet, the iceberg conveys a sense of strength and powerfulness. Personal qualities and experience lie below the surface of our doing. Professional practice draws on these dimensions as well as our theoretical/professional knowledge as we engage in decision-making within our everyday practices. It is the things below the surface that contribute to experience and drive who we are and what we do. If we only focus on what we see above the surface, that is, on the objective and visible aspects of what we do, while ignoring the intrapersonal qualities that underpin the doing, then our iceberg of practice may lose its buoyancy and become unstable - we begin to feel undervalued and misunderstood.

Knowledgeable early childhood professionals who are responsive and attuned to children convey their professionalism and the hidden dimensions of their practice through the environments they create and the interactions in which they engage with children and adults. However, there are many factors that contribute to the professional/practical knowledge that is reflected in practical wisdom. Professional practice and practical wisdom draw on knowledge and experience. Such practice also reflects understandings that have developed not only through experience and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge but through reflection and the capacity to appreciate the personal attributes, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and values that influence actions.
Promotion of the person in the process.

The highly complex work of being a teacher involves thinking and acting in emotional ways within given situations (Feldman, 1997; McLean, 1999). The personal, instinctive, intuitive, reflective and practical aspects of teaching are ever present as teachers bring knowledge and understandings to their everyday professional decision making (Butt, 1988 cited in Mclean, 1999, p.68). As a professional, being a teacher is much more than doing teaching. Teachers are people and make meaning in their role within given situations. This perspective on teaching pays greater attention to the beliefs and intentions of teachers than does a view of teaching from a narrower perspective of teacher knowledge and teachers as problem solvers and decision makers (Feldman, 1997). The following discussion considers the extent to which sources in the early childhood field recognise and value elements of practical wisdom and give recognition to the nature and personal characteristics and qualities indicative of the person(al) in the process of being a teacher.

Identification and representation of professional practice

In Australia, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) was established as a quality improvement and assurance program that supported professionals who work in daycare services. The QIAS addresses what are considered to be the key determinants of quality (Wangmann, 1995). The accreditation process is designed to place responsibility on staff in child care services to ascertain the extent to which they meet a set of required standards. However, a recent revision of the QIAS indicators that define quality has resulted in continuing emphasis being placed on the objectification and quantification of those practices deemed to be indicative of the quality of care. The focus on descriptors of quality standards draws attention to visible and quantifiable levels of performance. One of the difficulties in such an approach is that it reflects a more technical/rational way of thinking unless there are built in opportunities for self/group reflections and analysis. Emphasis on externally imposed standards is often associated with competencies - those things that can be readily observed, and the practical aspects of the professional's work rather than the rationale behind professional judgement and decision making. The reasoning behind a standards approach is that when standards are addressed and measured then a consistently high standard of quality will result (Fish, 1998).

The QIAS Source Book (NCAC, 2001) identifies 10 Quality Areas (and 35 Principles grouped within these Quality Areas) where the key to quality is the responsibilities of staff in relationship with children, adults and the environment. Within these Quality Areas quite specific reference is made to the elements of staff practices that reflect personal/professional qualities of both an interpersonal and intrapersonal nature. It is interesting, however, to consider not only what staff are expected to do and how they are expected to be with children and adults but those factors that contribute to this doing and being - the hidden dimensions of practice.

The QIAS Source Book, makes direct reference to the need for staff to display appropriate personal/professional attitudes (pp. 7, 14), to reflect on their own attitude and behaviours (p.9) and, to have a positive attitude towards diversity (pp.14 & 81). While the Source Book makes specific reference to 'professional development' (pp. 115-116), the notion of being a professional is subsumed within the actions and interactions identified by the indicators of quality practices. The focus in the Source Book is on professional responsibilities and readily recognises the doing of professional work.

It is only at the level of High Quality that any of 35 Principles in the Source Book makes specific reference to characteristics indicative of being (a professional). These references include engaging in self-reflection and reflective listening (Principles 1.2, 4.1, 2.3, 3.1, 5.2),
being self-aware (Principle 2.3), flexible (Principle 1.1) and, engaging in problem solving (Principles 2.2, 4.1, 6.5, 6.6, 7.1). Only 2 of the 835 descriptors of practice that are aligned to the Principles make specific reference to professional judgement (Principles 5.4 and 10.4). While these activities reflect elements of practical wisdom, there is little recognition of qualities of ethical and moral decision making that contribute to practical wisdom. That is, staff in children's services that are required to meet the quality assurance standards are called upon to demonstrate that they 'know how' and/or 'know that' but only limited attention is paid to meaning making that occurs within practice situations (Fenstermacher, 1994). Little account is taken of wisdom-in-practice as a characteristic of a being a wise teacher (Feldman, 1997; Goodfellow, 2001). Where attention is given to the importance of external standards that are placed under surveillance and are monitored through external auditing then professional integrity, autonomy and personal satisfaction are diminished. The person in the process is lost. Teachers under such circumstances may be motivated by those standards rather than the internal dimensions associated with self-study, self-regulation and a critical appreciation of practical wisdom. The sense of personal achievement and feelings of self-worth may be thwarted unless there is provision for acknowledging the professional capacity of knowledgeable practitioners to make judgements about and within professional practices (Darling, 2001; Fish, 1998; Goodfellow, 2001).

The freedom and ability to make value judgements and create meaning within the limits of ethical and philosophical choices contrasts sharply with a view that quality can be objectified and, therefore, is readily measurable (Dahlberg et al, 1999). Indeed, Dahlberg et al (1999) suggest that a trust in numbers reduces that complexity of the world into objective standards and measures that can more readily be compared and evaluated. Further, Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) argue that 'auditing' controls professional practice through a mistrust of the professional's 'capacity to engage in courageous and moral judgement' (p. 344). The following analysis of statements describing the work of early childhood professionals provides examples of how quantification may serve to provide objective description as well as reduce data into manageable units. While the results of such management remain open to contextual re-interpretation, they do serve a purpose in illustrating the issues that have already been raised.

**Professional qualities identified through position descriptions**

A sample of 32 advertised positions for early childhood teachers was drawn from the Saturday employment section in a large city newspaper, over a two month period early in 2002. Packages were sought from the 15 advertised positions that had a package of material available. While the other 17 did not indicate they had a package, they did list a number of criteria in their advertisement. The services that provided packages represented different types of management structures - local government (6), indigenous community (1), community managed (2), commercial (3), not-for-profit organisation (1), university based (1), corporate work based (1). The packages provided by these services contained position descriptions listing several pages of (professional) responsibilities in relation to the advertised position.

For the purposes of this analysis, the position descriptions were given a code and then searched for reference to the personal/professional qualities sought in the applicant for the position. Clusters of like qualities were then grouped within 'natural groupings' and assigned an identifier that best reflected the grouping. In assigning identifiers, those qualities that reflected what might be described as the hidden dimensions of practice, were also taken into account.

The analysis of position descriptions revealed that personal/professional qualities could be largely grouped with three main groupings. These were - interpersonal qualities such as the
ability to engage in positive and effective relationships (including respect, trust and act with integrity); capacity in terms of problems solving, reflection on action and creativity; and, intrapersonal qualities such as motivation, commitment and flexibility. Each position description listed at least one of the descriptors; however, none included descriptors that fell within all of the three groupings. What is of particular interest is that only one service specifically stated that it required the teacher in the position to ‘display a professional and ethical approach to work’ (Centre M). Indeed, only one required ‘reflective professional teaching’ (Centre N) and only one identified ‘judgement and problem solving skills’ as a requirement (Centre L2).

Scrutiny of the criteria listed by the 17 services that did not indicate that packages were available but listed criteria in their position description indicated that all services listed requirements that may be considered to have a knowledge base (such as qualifications, and knowledge of particular legislative requirements and practices). Seven of the 15 services specifically referred to skills in program planning and seven referred to interpersonal qualities relating to teamwork and/or communication skills. However, only three of the 15 services made any reference to intrapersonal qualities (i.e. motivation, enthusiasm and adaptability). While none of the services identified ‘reflectivity’ or ‘professional judgement’, three services required staff to have had ‘experience’. The focus on experience makes some assumptions about the nature of experience and how professional development may have occurred through that experience.

Several interpretations can be made from the pattern of analysis undertaken in relation to the detailed position descriptions and advertised criteria. The first is that having a knowledge base (i.e. having an appropriate qualification) enables the professional to act in a particular manner with the expertise required by the profession. However, as explained earlier, acting does not readily acknowledge the nature of being. Being is about who the person is and what they contribute to the situation. In being there is a sense of self and self-in-relationship. The hidden dimensions of practice contribute to the being. Having a knowledge base in terms of content knowledge and a list of activities is indicative of a technical/rational approach and views the teacher as a person who is doing teaching rather than being a teacher (Feldman, 1997). To be, is to live-the-life-of rather than act in prescribed ways (Feldman, 1997; Stengel, 1996).

In a study of tertiary students who were preparing to be early childhood teachers, Black and Halliwell (2000) found that the students had not encountered in their program of study, the opportunity to become critically aware of what they brought to being a teacher. That is, they were not articulate about the hidden dimensions of practice. If this is the case for many early childhood undergraduates, then the question arises as to how early childhood teachers begin to identify and gain recognition of the nature of being a teacher.

The second interpretation that can be drawn from the analysis of position descriptions is that they do just that. That is, they are intended to objectively describe the tasks to be undertaken and the skills required in order to undertake those tasks. However, by focussing on observable qualities of teaching, little recognition is given to those factors that contribute to teacher quality and hence, create a condition in which the person in the process is ignored.

A third interpretation is related to the expectation that the person applying for the position can be measured against other applicants using a set of criteria. There is an assumption here that the professional knowledge, skills and capacities that will enable the person to perform the required tasks can be readily measured. While such an assumption may be valid, it does not readily recognise the complexity of professional practice nor does it recognise those qualities that legitimise being a teacher. (In an effort to overcome this
difficulty, interviewers often use scenarios or case study examples for further explanation of the applicant's capabilities.) Another approach is for the applicant to document their professional practice and present interpretative accounts of that documentation at interview.

**Documenting professional practice**

Many early childhood professionals are beginning to question the extent to which they have effectively communicated their knowledge of early childhood pedagogy and practice and the richness of their work to others in the community (Fleer, 2002). In order to do this, practitioners must be in a position to clearly articulate not only what they do but provide 'texts' through which they purposefully reveal the nature of that work and their way of being. One such approach is the development of a professional portfolio.

Portfolios have been used extensively in undergraduate teacher education programs and other human services' programs such as nursing (Bell, 2001; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). A professional portfolio may be described as a planned and organised collection of artefacts and reflections on the professional's qualities and practices that illustrate who one is as a professional (Winsor, 1998). As a form of presentation, the portfolio may be seen as a file (even an electronic or multimedia file) or folder that contains and displays such research of the professional self. Artefacts (reflecting values and beliefs as well as practices) are collected and presented in the portfolio to show or demonstrate a professional's capacity to work in ways regarded by the profession to reflect those standards that the profession values. Material or artefacts collected for the portfolio may also include attestations by peers concerning the professional's work practices. However, in addition to containing a collection of artefacts the portfolio must include documented reflections on and analysis of one's professional attributes, beliefs and values. These qualities ought to reflect those characteristics that are deemed to be indicative of and valued by the profession.

Portfolio development provides an opportunity for documentation and for reflection on practice, an activity not always undertaken by caregivers (Ryan, Ochsner & Genishi, 2001). The portfolio is a narrative that tells a coherent story about practice through thoughtful reflection on and analysis of that practice; that is, it reflects a process (Darling, 2001; Wade & Yarborough, 1996). It is the process that enables the professional to get inside the nature of professional practice. The development of a professional portfolio is a way of researching and evaluating the 'professional self'. As such, the strategies used in presenting professional practices within the professional portfolio and the form of the presentation of that research is as much a reflection of the 'self' as is the documentation itself.

**Reflections on the power of professional documentation**

Schoenfeld (1999) argues that:

> The cognitive community... (and I include teachers here) ... has failed to make substantial progress on issues of self identity, of social interactions, of what it means to be a member of a community - and of how all of that relates to who we are, what we perceive, and what we do (p.5).

Professional documentation in the form of a portfolio has the potential to address some of these issues. An undergraduate early childhood teacher education student, having completed her professional portfolio recorded her reflections on the process of portfolio development:

> The portfolio that I have completed holds a collection of my work as a professional in the field of early childhood education. It demonstrates my
skills and abilities and offers documents and photos as validation of my professional experience.

I found it an interesting journey to map, document, and validate who I am as a professional in this field, and to realise the many skills and abilities that I possess. It has been an exhilarating experience to learn of the respect that I have from colleagues and families that I have worked with... This portfolio has also helped me to appreciate my growth and development in the teaching profession, and has helped to consolidate my concept of who I am as a teacher.

I consider this portfolio to be a dynamic document that will grow and change along with my journey as an early childhood professional. (Linda)

Documentation of professional practices provides concrete evidence for review and reflection. Such evidence can reveal not only the nature of teachers' work but honours that work through an exposition of professional practices. The portfolio enables a developing professional to not only reflect on their practices but provide a testament to those practices in a way that is enriching and empowering. If, as Gardner (1999) suggests, education is to be designed for understanding, then the professional portfolio provides an essential element in that process.

Conclusion

The challenge for early childhood professionals is to find ways in which to honour and expose the complexities of their work. Much has been learnt from the documentation of children's work. Practices associated with that documentation have begun to not only create more meaningful interpretations of children's thinking but explore the nature of that thinking and the extent of teachers' professional knowledge and understandings as they find meaning in children's work. It is timely, in a climate where early childhood teachers consider that there is little recognition of their work, to be more prudent in articulating the nature of professional practices. Teachers who begin to research their own practices should be encouraged to not only engage in critical reflection but to ensure that they adequately communicate insights into the nature of their work, to others in the community. Organisations that employ early childhood teachers should also be expected to acknowledge the hidden dimensions of professional practice. There is much at stake in the communicative competence of early childhood professionals and their capacity to honour the wisdom of their practices. Just as the child is (part of) the family, early childhood teachers are also situated and part of the social and political contexts within which practices occur. Their capacity to be professionally articulate in such communities is critical.

There is very good reason for concern about the increasing accountabilities being placed on early childhood teachers. The imposition of statutory requirements and accountabilities of what Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) describe as an 'audit society' could have a deleterious effect on teachers' capacity to engage in those practices associated with what I call ontological appreciation. Such appreciation addresses the processes associated with both the recognition of the artistry of professional practice and, critical analysis and the capacity to honour and value the self as a professional. The development of professional portfolios provides an opportunity for early childhood professionals to document the detailed, concrete and specific aspects of their knowledge and to become empowered through the ontological appreciation of the professional self. In this way, practitioner knowledge is not only honoured but made available for public scrutiny and review. Generating and sharing practitioner knowledge has the potential to enhance the image of the profession (Heibert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002).
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