



Redefining the early childhood profession: Bridging the great divide.

Carmel Maloney

Edith Cowan University

&

Lennie Barblett

Edith Cowan University

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Abstract

This paper addresses those issues recognised as perpetuating the divide between care and education. Whilst the OECD Report (Press & Hayes, 2000) placed Australia at the crossroads in terms of the tensions reflected in the divide between care and education, it would appear that the gulf is widening rather than shrinking. Issues such as professional status and standing, working conditions, and training and qualifications are discussed. Data are drawn from a survey conducted with students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (ECS) course. Students' perceptions of the major issues indicate that the divisions continue to be reinforced. This further highlights the need to redefine the knowledge base, policies and practices of care and education to reflect quality provisions and pre-service training and education which will provide a seamless approach to structures and practices.

Introduction

Much has been written about the diversity and tensions which exist in Australian policy and practice in relation to Early Childhood Education and Care (Press & Hayes, 2000; Child Care: Beyond 2001; Flear, 2000). Contention has centred on the complex issues of roles and responsibilities of government departments, provision of quality services, fragmentation of policy frameworks and the status and standing of the profession (Press & Hayes, 2000). These issues are compounded by a number of factors that contribute to the widening gulf, which exists in the care and education field in Australia. These factors include differences in ideology, community awareness of the importance of the early years, working conditions, training and qualifications, quality curriculum across sectors and provision of services.

Historically, childcare funding and government support was at its peak under the Commonwealth Labour Government (1983-1990). In this period the number of child care places available and government expenditure increased. As more children attended childcare facilities, support was extended to families using for-profit services and attention turned to issues of quality and the introduction of the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Assessment (QIAS). With the current Commonwealth Coalition Government in power, a policy shift resulted in the abolition of operational subsidies to non-profit childcare services. Instead, the trend today is to subsidise families rather than services and to encourage more private sector involvement (Press & Hayes, 2000). Along side this funding structure, responsibility for children's services and education reside in a number of disparate Commonwealth and State Government departments. The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services has major responsibility for family programs and early childhood education and care outside the school system, whilst the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs administers policies and funding for schooling (Press & Hayes, 2000).

In Western Australian at the state level, the Department of Education provides compulsory schooling in the year children turn six while the Department of Community Development has responsibility for all early childhood care services outside of the school system. However, non-compulsory schooling is available for children from the age of 4 years in kindergarten and pre-primary centres attached to local primary schools. A recent government policy change has seen the introduction of a change in the school entry age where children attending kindergarten will have turned 4 years by July of that year. This in effect results in children being 6 months

older when they begin school and in the first compulsory year of schooling children will be 6 years rising 7 years. This kind of policy change creates added pressure on the childcare system as presently administered.

What has been consistently noted in recent reports and forums is the lack of overall coordination and the absence of a coherent national agenda for children and families that take into account a multi-disciplinary approach. Currently, a number of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services exist for children and families across the age range of 0-8 years that attempt to meet a variety of needs but which lack a coordinated and focussed approach to administration and provision.

Background to the research project

The problems and concerns facing the early childhood care and education profession is a topic that generates much discussion and debate within the field. Furthermore, this debate is most rigorously carried out within the tertiary education sector where prospective early childhood educators are preparing for entry into the workforce. It seemed logical therefore that this cohort of students would provide some insight into working in early childhood care and education. The aim of data collection was to firstly include a perspective that has not been readily tapped and secondly to gain insight into the way students conceptualise working with children 0-8 years over a period of four years of training. Students in the study were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (ECS), which is a qualification that prepares graduates to work with children 0-8 years. The students graduating with this degree are accredited with an A* rating from the Western Australian Childcare Qualification Board. The qualification enables graduates to work with all ages within childcare services as well as fulfilling the requirements of the local education authorities for working in school systems. Given that the students have experience of working in both childcare and school settings and were about to make work place choices, it was felt that their perceptions and views would provide informative data about major issues for employment and career advancement.

Research project

Method

A survey was used as the primary method of collecting data. The survey was developed to enable a combination of numerical data and qualitative data to be accessed. The tallies provided frequency of responses while a more descriptive analysis of responses was made from the qualitative data.

The sample was comprised of two groups of students, 79 first year students and 61 fourth year students enrolled in the four year Bachelor of Education (ECS) degree. The first year students had completed two semesters of course work that addressed content related to children 0-3 years while the fourth year students were near course completion.

A sample of the questions asked includes:

Why have you chosen to study early childhood education?

What do you want to do with this qualification?

What are your views of working with children 0-3 years; 4-8 years?

What sector do you envisage working in and why?

When qualified what would entice you to take a position in childcare; school sector?

Do you think people outside the early childhood field value the work done by EC professionals? Give reasons for your answers.

How do you think the status of EC can be improved within the community?

Findings and discussion

The survey asked a range of questions related to choice of study, future employment, community perceptions of early childhood workers, improving the status of early childhood education.

Choice of study

The participants were asked to give reasons for choosing to study early childhood education. Table 1 is a summary of the reasons given by students. Data indicates that 23 (N79) first year students and 29 (N61) fourth year students entered the Bachelor of Education (ECS) because they had a strong affiliation with young children and aspirations to work with them. Comments included: *Because I enjoy working with children and find it really rewarding; I love young children and value their education.*

In many cases this career choice stems from a long held goal and desire to make a difference in the lives of young children. For example: *I am interested in making an impact where it counts and seeing young children develop; To broaden my field of work; I want to be the teacher instead of being the assistant; To enable me to peruse a full time career and still fulfil my commitment to my family*

The table below shows that the majority of responses were altruistic in nature and what is interesting from this data is that attitudes have not significantly changed over the four year course.

N79 N61

Theme	First year	Fourth year
Enjoy working with young children	23	29
Like or love children	22	6
Something I always wanted to do	15	11

Impact you have on children	10	9
Broaden field of work (beyond CC)	2	2
Other	7	4

Table 1: Reasons for choosing to study early childhood education

Future employment

Students were asked to indicate which sector of early childhood education they would choose to work in. Table 2 shows that the majority of first year (50) and fourth year (25) students had negative views of working with children 0-3, with comments such as:

Real educational experiences are not highly value; Staff are treated very badly, this is not an experience I would like to repeat; I felt as though I was there (CC field experience) as a babysitter; The work is boring and repetitious; Unfortunately the experiences I had with this age group were very negative -there is a definite need for quality child care within the community. Working in this area was generally seen as hard work, challenging, emotionally draining, undesirable and undervalued.

Responses	First year	Fourth year
Positive	8	16
Negative	50	25
Positive but will not work there	3	10
Other	18	10

Table 2: Views of working with children 0-3 years

In contrast, Table 3 indicates that the majority of students (36 first years and 50 fourth years) had positive views of working with children 4-8 years and envisage a career in the school system. Working in this area drew many positive comments and the work was generally viewed as interesting, rewarding and challenging. For example:

Can contribute to the development of today's young children; Teach children; Help children develop their abilities; I want to go up the ladder; I want to eventually be a

level 3 teacher; Children are more independent and can work on more in- depth tasks;

Likely to be better paid and have better conditions; The children can express their feelings and thoughts.

Responses	First year	Fourth year
Positive	36	50
Negative	0	0
Other	4	11

Table 3: Views of working with children 4-8 years

These findings are significant in that the perception of the participants is that the school sector is the context in which they can make a difference to children's growth and development and that this is where students foresee distinct career paths and opportunity for advancement.

By not nominating childcare as a place of fruitful employment it is questionable as to whether participants recognise the potential and possibilities of contributing to the growth and development of this age group.

Use of qualification

When students were asked how they would like to use their qualification, only 1 first year student indicated that they would like to open a childcare centre. The majority of participants (67 first years and 40 fourth years) nominated a teaching position within the school sector.

Theme	First year	Fourth year
Teach in Perth, country or OS	17	15
Teach K/PP	29	13
Teach Yr1-3	21	7
Work with children with special needs	3	2

Open a child care centre	1	
Full time teaching employment		15
Other	8	9

Table 4: What do you want to do with this qualification?

Reasons given included:

Make an impact on young children's lives

Work in a profession I feel comfortable in

Full time teaching employment

To teach in schools

The survey also asked students to list incentives that might entice them to work in the childcare sector. Table 5 below shows that out of 79 first year students, 20 responded that nothing would entice them to take a position in childcare, and 21 out of 61 fourth year students responded in this manner. Reasons for such a strong negative view were attributed to working conditions, salary and the low status attributed to the work.

Comments included: *More money; Better pay, higher status and shorter hours;*

Equal pay with teachers; Being a director; More respect and acknowledgment from Government and community.

Theme	First year	Fourth year
Nothing	20	21
Major role (director, curriculum advisor)	1	7
Conditions, money or status	12	27
A good centre	5	1
Maybe when travelling	3	
If nothing else available	3	5

Table 5: Taking a position in childcare

Community perceptions of early childhood workers

When participants were asked if they perceived the work of early childhood workers was valued by the community, the overwhelming response from both groups of students was no as indicated in Table 6 below.

Response	First year	Fourth year
Yes	9	6
No	51	39
Sometime or Yes and No	17	16

Table 6: Valuing the work done by EC workers

This view most likely contributes to the negative attitudes towards taking up positions in childcare. Responses indicated that the public perception of early childhood work centred on the notion of play and babysitting, where in reality it was hard work and required in depth planning. In the descriptive data, a distinction was drawn between childcare workers and teachers, for example: *they (childcare workers) are seen as babysitters, not professionals; teachers in year 1,2, and 3 there is more value and recognition.*

Improving the status of early childhood education

Participants referred to the low status of early childhood education held by the community and made a range of suggestions for how it could be improved within the community. Table 7 is indicative of the suggestions make by first and fourth year students.

Theme	First year	Fourth year
Public education and awareness	18	30
Promote research	3	6

Advocates to speak out	3	5
Promotion and advertising	19	17
Improving status	8	6
Other	28	3

Table 7: Improving the status of EC within the community

An overall summary of the data collected from first and fourth year education students indicates that the divisions between care and education continue to be reinforced. On graduation, almost all students elect to seek employment in the education system. Positions in childcare are seen as a last resort in times of teacher over supply. Given the current shortage of early childhood teachers it is anticipated that the take up of positions in childcare by qualified teachers will even less.

Responses to the survey centre around the low status of child care workers and of the industry in general. Poor working conditions such as long hours, low salaries, split shift work, lack of professional development opportunities, and the low status attributed to the work continue to dominate discussion and influence decisions to work in this area. Experiences had by the participants during practice placements contribute to negative perceptions of childcare work. Reports indicate that staff are treated poorly, the work is emotionally draining, mundane and repetitive. All participants reported positive comments about working with 4-8 year olds. Indications are that this sector is seen as having career opportunities, better conditions in terms of pay and working hours and better resource support. Participants considered they could make a difference in the lives of children at this level, through programs that were planned and assessed. The status of early childhood teachers was perceived as higher from the point of view of respect from the parents and the profession.

Career advancement was seen as an important aspect of training and gaining qualifications. Participants reported that this was more likely to occur in the school sector than in the childcare sector. Studying for four years was seen as almost being 'over qualified' for working with children 0-3 years. Many students enter the Bachelor of Education (ECS) after completing a Diploma of Community Services at TAFE. These students use the four year degree as a pathway out of the childcare system into the education system which affords benefits otherwise not available to them. This drain of qualified childcare workers is a major concern to the field and is perpetuating the divide between care and education.

From the data it can be assumed that the participants hold a narrow view of the type of work carried out in childcare settings. Childcare work is seen as lacking in quality, depth, relevance and challenge for children. Teaching in the school sector (4-8 years) is perceived as rigorous, structured in terms of curriculum frameworks, accountable and rewarding. Comments such as: *work with 4-8 year olds is more educationally based; its hard to implement learning experiences with 0-3 year olds; I felt like a babysitter when working with 0-3 year olds* indicate that childcare work is perceived as low in educational value. This could stem from negative experiences and from poor models of practice encountered during practice placements. However,

it may also be an area that needs addressing within the Bachelor of Education (ECS).

Recommendations for bridging the divide

The early childhood care and education debate has been an ongoing one for decades. What is particularly disturbing is that while problems and concerns have been identified and debated in countless forums, Australia is no closer to implementing solutions for the improvement of care and education for children. Indeed, when compared to countries around the world Australia lags well behind. For example, New Zealand faced a similar dilemma in the middle 1980's (Meade & Podmore, 2002) while the United Kingdom has made notable contributions to a national early years policy agenda since 1996 (Pugh, 2002). This apathy has primarily been due to a lack of political support and commitment. The government both at federal and state level does not seem to have the political will to address the issue, and therefore Australia is lagging further behind the rest of the world. This lack of commitment is in spite of research clearly outlining that high quality early childhood care and education has long term positive effects for children (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Shore, 1997). With no coherent early years policy there can be no strategy to improve the quality for children, or the status and standing of the profession.

Training and qualifications

The findings from this research indicate that the area of training and qualifications of early childhood educators is a contentious one and needs to be examined. There is no doubt that working in childcare centres is complex. Current theory of how children grow and learn has changed the way society views children and childhood. Rather than assuming that young children don't learn anything important before they get to school, we know that children from birth are capable and competent learners. Helping children to achieve their potential requires professionals who possess a range of complex skills and who have in-depth knowledge and understanding of child development and educational theory. It seems therefore, an opportune time to consider the type of training and qualifications available. As outlined by Abbott and Kane (1998) the years 0-8 must be seen as a continuum and training courses should prepare students to work in the full range of early years settings.

It can be argued that using Registered Training Organisations including TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) where training is competency based has had a detrimental effect on the quality of the training and hence quality of the worker entering the field. Competency based education can have the tendency to measure only tasks to a designated standard rather than knowledge and understanding of why the task is performed. While it can be counter-argued that competent tasks require certain levels of knowledge, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that the quality of graduates has declined since competency based assessment was introduced at TAFE institutions.

Recent research into early childhood education, which includes new insights into early brain development (Shore, 1997), indicates that there is an increase in expectation and responsibility when working with young children, and an elevation of the profession. If early childhood care and education is to become more professional in its goals then it is inevitable that expectations and demands will increase (Garbett

& Yourn, 2002). It has become evident that minimum standards of training are no longer adequate for maintaining quality and standards in care and education and for preparing professionals that are skilled in providing rich and positive experiences for children. Yet, there seems to be a lack of concern over qualifications and training. This is indicative of outmoded attitudes that perpetuate the idea that childcare work is low status and conducted by women who have a natural disposition for this kind of work (Hevey & Curtis 1996).

Garbett & Yourn (2002) discuss the nature of student teacher knowledge and conclude that this is an area that warrants further research particularly in relation to early childhood educators. What is clear however is that early childhood educators require knowledge and skills in how to work with young children but also how to facilitate and extend their learning and interests. This implies that in-depth pedagogical content knowledge as described by Shulman (1986) is essential so that children engage in rich learning experiences that enable them to learn about the world in which they live. This type of practice requires that graduates develop relevant pedagogical skills that do not necessarily equate with traditional instructional models, and content knowledge capable of providing enriched learning opportunities for all children. It is unlikely that this kind of expert knowledge can be adequately developed in a training course that is based on the demonstration of basic competencies. Early childhood care and education requires specialised training and comprehensive programs of study that produce knowledgeable graduates. A graduate level qualification for all early years workers, not just teachers would send a clear message to the public about the importance of this work. In addition it would lift the status of the work as well as provide graduates with a greater sense of satisfaction about career choice.

At present regulations regarding the number of qualified staff and type of qualifications required vary from state to state. For example in Western Australia, it is not necessary to have a trained teacher working with kindergarten children within a childcare setting. This lack of uniformity of regulations across the country intensifies inequity and fragmentation of provision.

The responses from the student survey outlined above indicated that the respondents had a biased perspective of the work undertaken in childcare settings. As the majority of graduates look for employment in the school sector due to more appealing working conditions, it is easy to lose focus and to shift the emphasis within the course. Efforts must be made to maintain a balanced program that ensures a blend of vocational and academic skills and which has a multi-disciplinary approach that suits the needs of the profession.

Integration of early childhood care and education

The varying perceptions of care and education were evident in the survey responses of students in this study. Students reported differences in conditions, status, job satisfaction, public attitudes, and training needs. Evidence shows that when early childhood care and education are administrated by one government department outcomes for children are more likely to be enhanced (Meade & Podmore, 2002). An integrated government administration of services would facilitate the development of quality provision of services and a seamless curriculum to better meet the needs of all children and families. Centralised administration and funding would ensure greater

accessibility to services, coordination of provisions and cohesive plans for future development.

The New Zealand experience is an example of a government recognizing that education and care are inseparable and that equitable resources for all types of early childhood services is essential for the provision of quality early childhood education. Australia can well look to its New Zealand neighbour as an example of innovation and commitment to the welfare of children and families. New Zealand recognised that quality services and quality education and training were more likely to occur with an administration that is cohesive and focused on the same issues (Meade & Podmore, 2002).

Bringing about an integrated administrative structure will need both leadership from the field and political conviction and action. Unless the government embraces a national policy framework Australia will continue to lag behind the rest of the world. Pugh (2002) suggests a lead government department (federal or state) must have a clear overall vision for early years policy and services and support this with legislation. Couple this with adequate funding and specific goals and targets for flexible provision, and progress is more likely to be the outcome.

Status and standing

The community's perception of childcare is a concern that should be addressed. The importance of the early years is well documented and is discussed in numerous forums. However, the status and standing of those who work with young children continue to be low. A major factor that contributes to this perception is working conditions. Work in childcare settings is undervalued and poorly paid and requires long hours generally completed in split shifts. These conditions contribute to poor retention of staff that in turn has led to a shortage of qualified workers. The problem of staff shortage has led to an increase in the number of junior, untrained workers being employed in centres and placed in positions of responsibility with children (Sims, 2002). This system raises serious questions regarding the employment of 14 and 16 year olds and their subsequent placement in adult roles. Sims (2002) asks whether junior wages benefit the childcare industry. We would argue that junior wages is detrimental to the field and perpetuates the risk of exploitation and more importantly the risk to high quality care and education. It is this kind of practice that contributes to perceptions of low status and adds fuel to the argument for higher qualifications.

Raising community awareness of the importance of the early years requires a planned strategy. Disseminating research findings to the public is one way of promoting the value of children and the work associated with children's wellbeing, but without additional resources directed into the system significant advances will not be made. A national policy framework along the lines of that established in the United Kingdom would identify clear targets for expansion and development, integrate provision and address the issues of professionalism.

A shift in ideology

It was evident in the study conducted that students held different beliefs about working in childcare and in the school sector. These kinds of differences in ideology act to maintain the dichotomy between care and education. It is well known amongst educators that care and education are so interdependent that it is unreasonable to try to segregate them. Yet, the public image of childcare and education reflects a lack of shared understanding of the nature and role of care and the nature and role of education. Misconceptions are reinforced by the nomenclature of care and education and the different status extended to both these concepts (Fleer, 2000). Debate over whether child care services should be called something else has seen the emergence of a range of titles such as, early learning centres, child development centres, and early care and education. There is no doubt that the term 'education' receives greater support from the public and government and has a higher status in the community.

What is disturbing is that this division is to a certain extent perpetuated from within the field. Each sector is intent on protecting their own patch and therefore early years care and education partnerships are difficult to cultivate. For this to occur there needs to be a significant shift in ideology and in what each of the sectors supposedly value. Care has traditionally been regarded as mothering, unskilled and custodial while education is associated with learning outcomes and development and is more likely to have public support. In other words there needs to be a meeting of the minds; joint thinking and joint services. Advocates must argue for quality childcare as a form of early education and that an educational emphasis results in better developmental outcomes and is not necessarily detrimental for children. A further shift in thinking is needed with regard to the hierarchy that exists within the workforce. Early childhood teachers are seen as high status and well qualified while childcare workers are much further down the pecking order even though the nature of their work is not dissimilar.

A shift in ideology must begin within the context of training. Courses of study need to get back to debating professional knowledge and beliefs about learning, examining socio-cultural practices and exploring the complex nature of children's growth and development. In other words, we need to go beyond the notion training for skills where performance is measured against a set of indicators.

For change to occur the government also needs to make a commitment and act on its rhetoric. That is, acknowledging the importance of the early years and establishing organizations that have little power to make changes is not enough. There must be legislation with clear goals for integration and funding which is not at the mercy of changing governments and their political agendas.

Conclusion

Addressing the divisions that exist between care and education will need to begin with a shared understanding of early childhood philosophical and pedagogical foundations. Advocates for the field must promote a common set of principles underpinning quality of provisions, curriculum, regulations and training. This will take redefining the knowledge base, policies and practices of care and education particularly in the 0-8 year age range to reflect quality pre-service training and education.

A seamless approach to structures, and practices including a curriculum for early years education is a way forward. Several countries (New Zealand, Italy, United Kingdom, Spain) have adopted a holistic approach to early childhood education that promotes learning as an integrated activity and does not distinguish between care and education. A curriculum that is inclusive of children 0-8 years could be a critical factor in achieving integration of services. Common goals and outcomes for children 0-8 years will facilitate this integration and better meet the needs of Australian children and families.

Current literature and research evidence of the long term benefits of high quality early childhood programs must be used to convince government officials, practitioners, advocates and the public of the worth of long term financial investment in this country's greatest asset, its future generation. It will take a unified and coherent plan by the government to provide legislative support and to show that it is serious about its commitment to the wellbeing of children and families. A common agenda for children and families will strengthen communities by ensuring equity in services, provisions and standards as well as strengthen the nation through its investment in children.

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