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Exploring the Beliefs of Commencing Early Childhood Education Graduate Students: Providing Insights to Improve Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract: In response to the increased demand for qualified early childhood educators in Queensland, many universities are being challenged to tailor make programs and identify innovative practices that support individuals interested in pursuing such a teaching qualification. Although research indicates that beliefs and perceptions are an important influence on pre-service teacher success in teacher education programs as well as in the workforce, little is known about those of students as they enter early childhood education programs. This study focuses on the beliefs and perceptions that students bring to a Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Education (GDipECE) being offered at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. This snapshot provides key messages for teacher educators interested in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Introduction

Beliefs are an important foundation for early childhood educators. The way they engage with their work is dependent on a strong understanding of what an early childhood educator is. Although research (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) suggests that beliefs and perceptions are an important influence on pre-service teacher success in teacher education programs as well as in the workforce, little is known about those of students entering early childhood pre-service teacher programs. This study focuses on the beliefs and perceptions that students bring to a graduate Early Childhood Education program being offered at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. The program is designed for students with a non-education undergraduate Bachelor degree interested in a career in early childhood education. The beliefs provide a snapshot of initial beliefs about the construct of 'early childhood teacher'. An understanding of these beliefs can be used to shape future planning in teacher education.

Literature Overview

Teacher Beliefs: Theoretical context

Research indicates that teachers' practices are associated with their beliefs (Bandura, 2006; Charlesworth, Hart, Burts & Hernandez, 1991) and that new information encountered by teachers is filtered through their existing beliefs (Kagan, 1992). Teacher beliefs in turn have been claimed to contribute to job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni & Steca, 2003); commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992); level of planning and organisation

(Allinder, 1994); the search for new teaching formulae; and the use of innovative teaching methods (Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997; Wertheim & Leyser, 2002). Therefore, research on the beliefs of pre-service teachers in relation to early childhood practices can inform pre-service teacher education and perhaps ensure that graduates develop the confidence, skills and knowledge that will best fulfil their future role as educators of young children.

In support of a cultural self-identity formation conceptualisation, Aldemir and Sezer (2009) argue that pre-service identity and teacher beliefs are formed through their up-bringing, culture and life experience and include memories of their past teachers. Unlike other professions, everyone has experience in schooling to draw on (Lortie, 1975) and it is the nurturing and caring dimensions of past teachers that are often remembered best and considered the most important quality of teachers. Past or current work experience with children then helps pre-service teachers confirm and extend their existing beliefs. These preconceived beliefs about teaching filter the knowledge and colour the changes experienced during teacher education, informing their philosophy of teaching (Çelikten, 2006). Thus preconceived beliefs may be carried on into professional careers unless pre-service teachers are made aware of, reflect on, and confront and challenge their beliefs.

Problems with teacher education have also been noted in the literature. Noble and Macfarlane (2007) claimed that many early childhood teacher-education programs perpetuate highly romanticised images of early childhood teaching. If pre-service teachers' romanticised beliefs of early childhood teaching are reinforced rather than challenged, then they will inform teachers' behaviour and practice in the classroom (Sumsion, 2003). Of great concern, is that romanticised beliefs lead to unrealistic expectations of teachers operating in a global world with diverse cultural communities. These unrealistic expectations are likely to influence negative perceptions of self-efficacy and lead to burnout (Noble & Macfarlane, 2007).

Pedagogical beliefs, (for example about what learning is, and a teacher's role in assisting it) underpin a personal pedagogical paradigm (Geoghegan, Geoghegan, O'Neill & White, 2004). The personal pedagogical paradigm is seen as a continuum that spans a teacher's pre-service and in-service years responding to, or effected by, accumulating experiences and knowledge (Zanting, Verloop & Vermunt, 2001). When beliefs are confronted by changing realizations and new realities (Gordon & Debus, 2002) the paradigm may be shifted, modified and even transformed.

Along with pedagogical beliefs, pre-service teachers' beliefs about their own capabilities are important to study as research has found that positive beliefs about their capability (self-efficacy) can play an important mediating role between knowledge, skills and actions as a teacher (Bandura, 1997). Beginning teachers with high level self-efficacy are more willing to pursue challenging goals, have greater perseverance and are more resilient in adverse situations (Bandura, 1997; Main & Hammond, 2008). Students who hold exaggerated expectations about their own success as teachers may devalue the need for professional preparation and may experience a severe reality shock (Weinstein, 1989) when they undertake professional practice. It is important therefore to ensure that, within pre-service education experiences, unrealistic expectations are addressed in such a way that a strong and realistic sense of self-efficacy is preserved.

Relational Beliefs

Previous research suggests pre-service teachers' beliefs about what constitutes an effective teacher highlight a strong emphasis on relational characteristics (Bauml, 2009; Fajet et al., 2005). Relational traits are consistently identified by pre-service teachers as characteristics of overall good teaching (Weinstein, 1989; Yoder, Shaw, Siyakwazi, & Yli-Renko, 1993) and appear to be influenced by prior experiences "working with children, the

university's teacher education program curriculum and/or the course content presented by their instructors" (Bauml, 2009, p.907).

Too strong a focus on the relational aspects of teaching has been identified as a possible cause for concern. Pre-service teachers expressing such views may seem simplistic and overly optimistic (Fajet et al., 2005; Goldstein & Lake, 2000). Fajet et al. (2005) suggest education students who favour relational aspects of teaching may undervalue the importance of pedagogical and subject matter. The development of what are seen as naive views may be attributed to watching their own teachers from an early age which Lortie (1975) calls an 'apprenticeship of observation'. Observation of personal teachers develops folk theories about what it takes to be a teacher (Doolittle, Dodds, & Placek, 1993). Holt-Reynolds (1992) found that students still tend to accept their own schooling experiences as prototypical and generalisable even towards the teaching profession.

Beliefs about Effective Teachers

Many studies have explored pre-service teachers' conceptions of effective teacher characteristics in early childhood education (Lin, Hazareesingh, Taylor, Gorrell & Carlson, 2001; Skamp, 1995; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Yoder, Shaw, Siyakwazi, & Yli-renko, 1993). These studies suggest they identify interpersonal skills and strong management as descriptors of effective teachers. Hammerness et al. (2005, p.369) further notes that pre-service teachers' beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning vary widely where beliefs are "more nuanced - and extend across a wider range of possibilities -than many people had imagined". As yet, little is known about the wide range of beliefs early childhood-pre-service teachers hold and how this might influence their practice as an early childhood educator.

Some researchers argue that beliefs about teaching are based on limited understanding and experience. Cole and Knowles (1993) point out that preconceptions were formed based on limited experience and understanding of the realities of teaching, and as a result, are disconnected from the actual realities of classroom practice. Pre-service teachers are only beginning to formulate the wisdom of practice (Shulman, 1986) that would enable them to create the complex and nuanced processes that characterise effective teachers.

According to Hammerness et al., (2005), careful and strategic planning is needed to scaffold pre-service teachers' beliefs to equip them for early childhood settings. Pre-service teachers are often positioned as being deficit in knowledge of the profession. Bauml's (2009) study disrupts such a negative view of pre-service teachers by showing that they are capable of recognising the nuanced, purposeful role of teacher-child relationships in effective teaching. We suggest that teacher educators must listen to pre-service teachers, "empowering them to recognise complex inner workings of the teaching profession before exiting programs" (2009, p.907). Therefore, research on the beliefs of beginning pre-service teachers in relation to early childhood practices is needed to inform and shape teacher education programs. Further, it may encourage teachers of these programs to examine and model their own implicit theories and make educational beliefs an explicit part of teacher education (Weinstein, 1989).

Focus of Study

In light of the National Quality Reform Agenda and the focus on early childhood education and care in Australia, it is important to understand the current beliefs of pre-service early childhood educators to best address professional learning needs. The study is designed to identify initial beliefs about the construct of 'early childhood teacher' based on the beliefs of pre-service teachers commencing their teacher education. Such findings are useful for the design of teacher education programs. At the time of the initial data collection, pre-service teachers were in the first three weeks of commencing a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education at Griffith University (Queensland).

Method

Setting

Participants in the study were enrolled in a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education at Griffith University which is a large, multi-campus regional university located in South East Queensland, Australia. The Graduate Diploma program is delivered to students at two campuses located in large cities (Brisbane and Gold Coast). Twenty-six students were enrolled on the Brisbane campus and 22 students were enrolled on the Gold Coast campus. The program consists of core subjects dedicated to the development of informing discipline knowledge, curriculum studies and practical skills required for early childhood education.

Students undertake two professional experience periods during their study. These occur towards the end of semester one and semester two. In this study, students were in the first week of study and not influenced by practical experience.

Mixed Mode Procedure

The questionnaire for this study incorporated questions to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data in an attempt to better understand the beliefs and perceptions of commencing pre-service early childhood educators. All students enrolled in the degree were potential participants of the study. During the first weeks of commencing the Graduate Diploma program, pre-service teachers were invited to volunteer to participate in the study and complete the questionnaire.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions to identify the backgrounds of the participants. Basic frequency counts were used to collate data within identified categories.

Qualitative methods of data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to explore early childhood pre-service teachers' beliefs towards the early childhood industry and effective teaching. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of a range of open questions designed to elicit students' perceptions and beliefs of early childhood teaching. Questions were designed based on the model of question-answer behaviour explored by Foddy (1993) that provides important principles to ensure answers are interpretable and comparable. These principles, designed to produce valid, reliable respondent information, relate to topic, applicability and perspective (TAP) are outlined below:

- The topic should be properly defined so that each respondent clearly understands what is being talked about.
- The applicability of the question to each respondent should be established: respondents should not be asked information that they do not have.

- The perspective that respondents should adopt, when answering the question, should be specified so that each respondent gives the same kind of answer (Foddy, 1993, p.193).

The open questions in this section of the questionnaire provided an in-depth understanding of the frames of reference to be identified. Answers provide new understandings of participants' beliefs and perceptions in relation to becoming an early childhood teacher. Examples of questions included:

- Five characteristics of an early childhood teacher?
- Can you describe the benefits of becoming an ECE teacher?
- Can you describe some of the concerns of becoming an ECE teacher?
- What do you believe makes a good teacher for young children?

Data from the questionnaire were analysed using content analysis. This is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) in the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18). An adapted version of Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran's (2001, p.171) 15 stages of content analysis (constant comparative method) was used as a guide to identify key themes and meanings. This process allowed newly identified themes to be compared with previously identified themes to ensure a greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Participants

Forty-eight students in the program were invited to participate. At campus A: *N*=19 (class of 26, 73% response rate); and at Campus B: *N*=19 (class of 22, 86% response rate). All of the participants were females and citizens of Australia. Participants' ages varied between 20 and 58 years of age. All had completed a diverse range of undergraduate Bachelor degrees that included, for example, arts, business, journalism, commerce, nursing, sociology and psychology.

Findings

Findings revealed information about participants' choice of early childhood education and perceptions of the early childhood industry. Findings helped create the construct of a romanticised view of an early childhood teacher. Each category is presented below, before a discussion and conclusion.

Choice of Early Childhood Education

Participants were asked to comment why they chose to study a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education. For both Campus A and B, working with children appeared a major influence over choices. Perceived working conditions (hours, career, work casually) also emerged as an influence over choice. At Campus B, securing teacher registration was also important to participants. Findings are presented in figure 1 and 2.

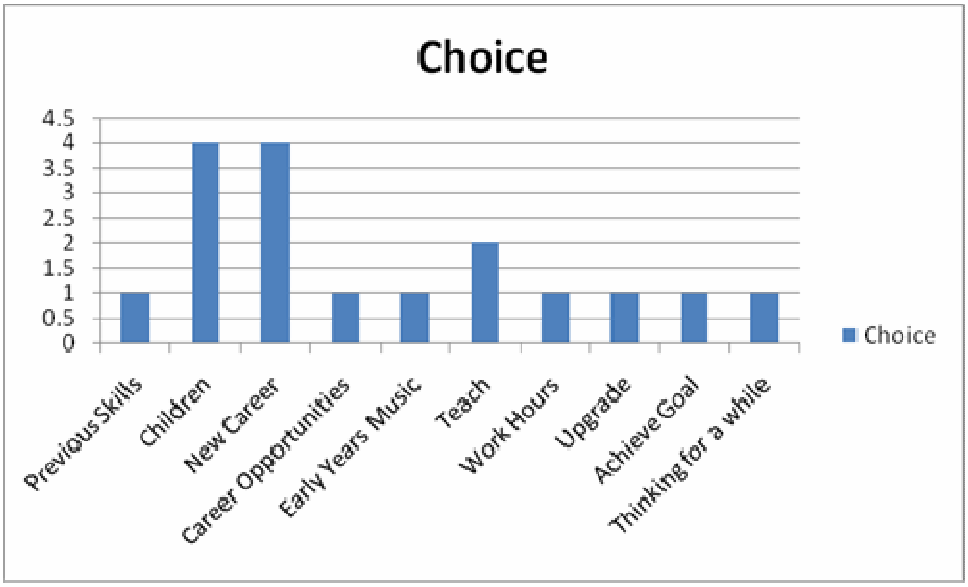

Figure 1: Campus A Choice for Early Childhood Education

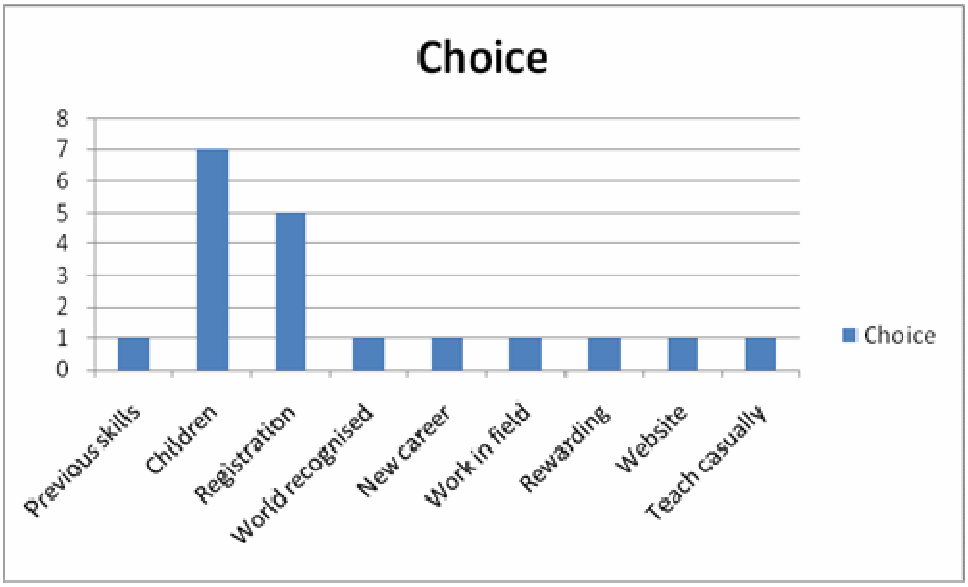

Figure 2: Campus B Choice for Early Childhood Education

Perceptions of Early Childhood

Participants were asked to comment on their perceptions of the early childhood industry by commenting on the characteristics of an early childhood teacher and the benefits and concerns related to becoming an early childhood educator. Initial responses at the commencement of their teacher education provided a snapshot of the construction of the cultural (school setting) self identity of the early childhood teacher.

Characteristics of an Early Childhood Teacher

Participants were asked to list five characteristics of an early childhood teacher. In relation to previous studies (see Bauml, 2009; Fajet et al., 2005), the participants in this study identified relational characteristics of effective teachers such as caring, patience and

encouraging. Similar to Bauml (2009), participants also identified characteristics that influenced children's learning and behaviour. Communication was another identified characteristic. As Ozgun-Koca and Sen (2006) found in their study of pre-service teachers' conceptions of 'good teachers', teacher-student communication was a vital component of the instructional process, leading to cognitive growth. Findings from each of the campuses are presented below in figure 3 and 4.

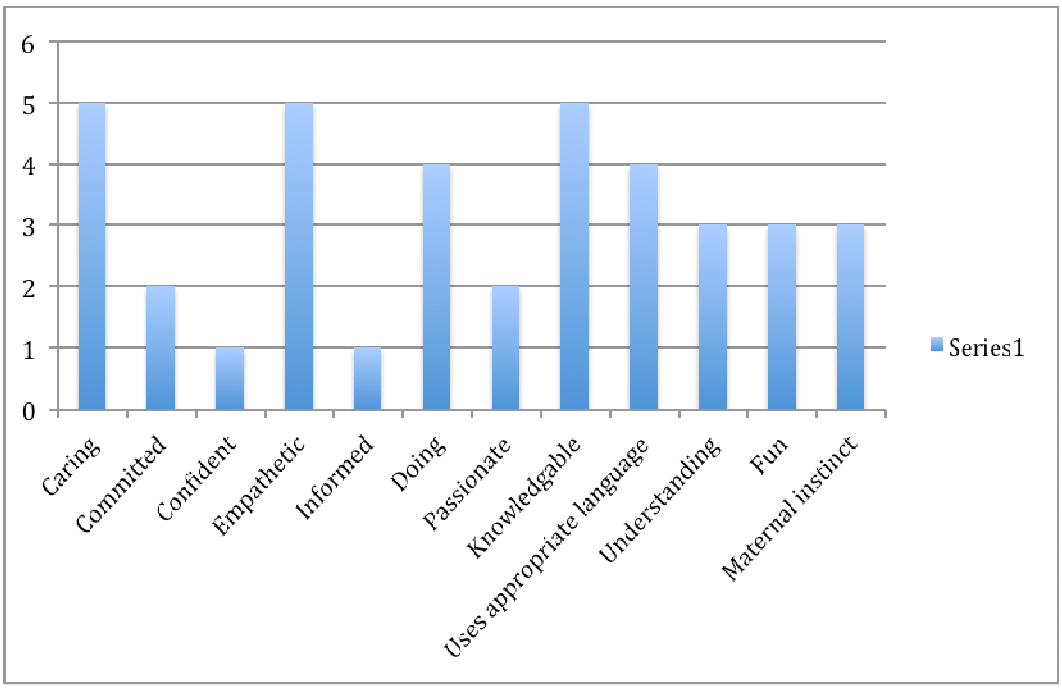

Figure 3: Campus A: Characteristics of an Early Childhood Teacher

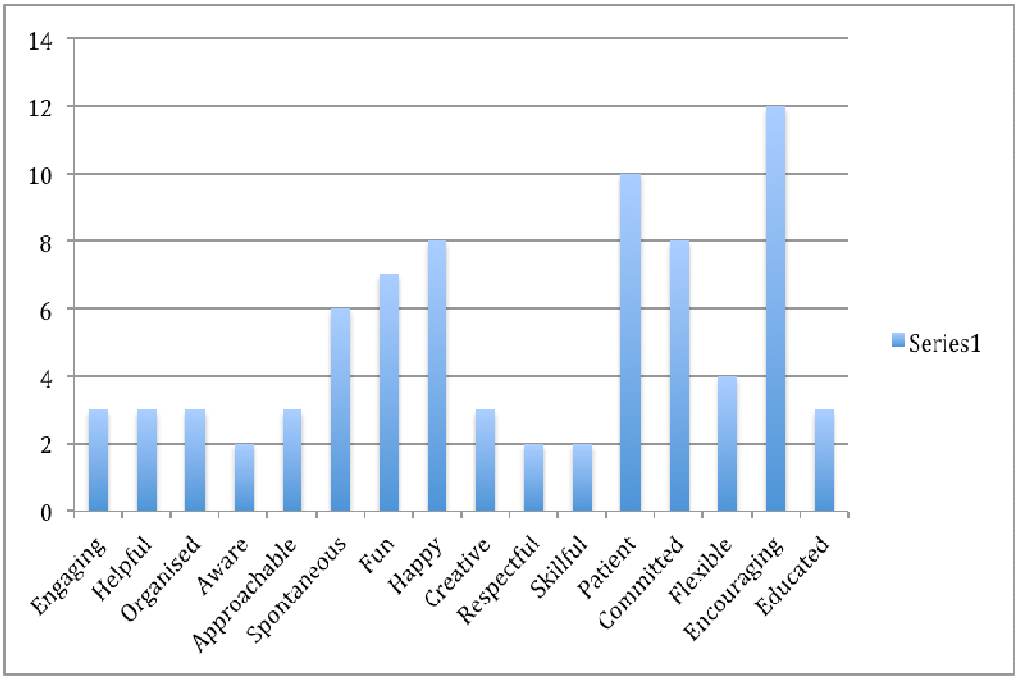

Figure 4: Campus B Characteristics of an Early Childhood Teacher

Benefits of Becoming an Early Childhood Teacher

Two major themes emerged around the proposed benefits of becoming an early childhood teacher. The first related to the workplace structures involved with becoming an early childhood teacher. Participants considered teaching an enjoyable job, with excellent conditions of career paths, hours, holidays and options for casual work:

The ability to maintain a career path. (Campus A, Participant 6);
Enjoyable work, good work conditions, good students. (Campus A, Participant 16);
*Enjoyable job, satisfaction in watching children grow, hours, holidays, options for casual work. (Campus B, Participant 6);*and
Good work hours, love to work with kids and you have holidays off. (Campus B, Participant 14).

The second theme to emerge was the opportunity to engage with children. Participants valued the opportunity to take part in a child's learning, with a strong belief they could make a difference in the life of children. Comments included:

To see the spark in a child's eyes, to hear them laugh and to see them develop and learn new things- to see them achieve the best. (Campus A, Participant 1);
The opportunity to provide children with effective learning experiences to grow and excel in all areas of life is a very rewarding and special role. (Campus A, Participant 4);
Hopefully having a chance to make a difference in children's life from a very early age. (Campus A, Participant 14);
Experience with dealing with children in a positive environment. (Campus B, Participant 3);
One gets to be a part of the lives and learning journey of young children, to hopefully make a difference in their lives. (Campus B, Participant 10); and
Working with small children in a play based environment. (Campus B, Participant 11).

Concerns of Becoming an Early Childhood Teacher

Participants also wrote of their concerns related to becoming an early childhood teacher. Three major themes emerged of perceptions about teaching, working with children and finding a job.

Participants discussed negative perceptions around working as an early childhood teacher. Since these pre-service teachers had not yet commenced professional experience in schools, it is not known where negative perceptions about early childhood teachers may have developed but is could be suggested these were based from their own school experience. Comments included:

Strict guidelines exposed [sic] on teachers when dealing with individual children. Working conditions and environment of school. (Campus B, Participant 3);
Working alongside people that do not value the importance of early childhood. (Campus B, Participant 12); and
Being undermined as a type of teacher not equivalent to others, other people's misconceptions. (Campus B, Participant 15).

Participants also raised concerns about working with children who had learning needs and difficult behaviour:

Working with children who need extra attention and support, making sure that I provide the best teaching for all students. (Campus A, Participant 3);
*Difficulty in a child's behaviour, learning abilities, dealing with parent concerns. (Campus B, Participant 18);*and

Being able to offer adequate support to families who have English as a second language and those children with disabilities. (Campus B, Participant 19).

Another theme to emerge surrounded job prospects once students had graduated. Participants were worried about a reported over-supply of teachers. Comments included:

*Jobs at the end. (Campus A, Participant 9);*and

*Oversupply of existing teachers- will I get a job? (Campus A, Participant 12);*and

Is it easy to get a job with Education QLD? Will I be a competent teacher in just 1 year? (Campus A, Participant 13).

Discussion

The data presented in this article revealed the perceptions and beliefs of pre-service teachers at the beginning of their early childhood education program. It provides information to help inform teacher education programs in the future. Research-based evidence of beginning pre-service teachers' conceptions of the profession is important as at the commencement of their pre-service training pre-service teachers do not yet have the work experience that socializes them into the commonly held, uniform beliefs of the teaching profession. The findings of this study are discussed in terms of future planning for teacher education programs.

Despite the broad age distribution of participants, and the diverse range of non-education qualifications gained prior to enrolling in the program, responses to questions about early childhood education as a profession revealed similarities in the views and beliefs of participants. Participants perceived teaching to be an enjoyable job, with excellent conditions in relation to career paths, hours, holidays and options for casual work. They characterised early childhood educators as caring, patient and encouraging, attentive, and empathetic. These findings suggest that some beginning pre-service teachers had an idealized or romanticised view of early childhood education that lacked understanding of the complexity of the profession. Findings support previous research about the 'romantic view' of early childhood teachers suggesting that this view still dominates pre-service teacher thinking. Such views may be considered "deficit". When pre-service teachers enter their first placement with such views, they may encounter a 'reality shock' as they realise a difference between what they anticipated working as an early childhood teacher would be like and what they experienced in the field. It can be problematic if the 'reality shock' is too big, creating a substantial emotional journey for the student to re-position their beliefs. For some pre-service teachers the 'shock' may be too large and they may leave the early childhood teacher education program or leave early into their career because of burnout. Other pre-service teachers may simply re-evaluate what quality teaching in the early years is, lowering their own expectations to risk a self-assessment of failure.

The characteristics that focussed on relational dimensions of teaching are similar to findings in previous international studies (Fajet et al, 2005; Osgood, 2006) that concluded that pre-service teachers are simplistic and overly optimistic about the profession. This suggests that teacher education programs in Queensland may be similar to overseas institutions with little time devoted to strategies to change the 'romanticised' beliefs in current teacher education programs. Rather, it could be suggested that the focus in teacher education programs is on learning and understanding early childhood education theory with limited time devoted to working with beliefs. This is an important finding for early childhood education. If quality is expected to improve in early childhood education in Australia, change must also happen within tertiary education to help work with the initial beliefs of early childhood students. Such a focus on working with beliefs needs to be introduced early into teacher education to reduce the risk of 'reality shock' when entering the classroom.

Participants in the current study identified pedagogical characteristics that influence student learning and behaviour as well as relational characteristics of effective teachers. Pre-service teachers' concerns about supporting children with English as a second language, and children with disabilities (Campus B, participant 19) are demonstrating awareness of the pedagogical dimensions of teaching. The participants from Campus A and Campus B revealed a nuanced understandings of the connections between relationships, pedagogy, and classroom management and are well positioned to develop the capabilities that will enable them to become effective teachers with the support of teacher educators.

The Future for Early Childhood Teacher Education

These findings suggest that as teacher educators, it is important to take account of pre-service teacher beliefs and employ strategies to support pre-service teachers to gain understanding of the complex nature of teaching. A focus on working with beliefs is necessary after entry into a teacher education program to allow time for beliefs to be discussed and reassessed. Such strategies will help support the development of personal professional identities of early childhood educators. Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) proposed that teacher-educators provide theoretical toolboxes to enable pre-service teachers to analyse the ways knowledge limits and constrains practice, consider their work with young children from different perspectives, and assist them in creating alternate possibilities. They outline three strategies: situating knowledge, multiple readings, and engaging with images that assist both pre-service teachers and teacher educators to take a different stance to knowledge and how we approach our work with young children. We suggest that, given teaching cannot be reduced to isolated techniques, these theoretical tools provide a way for beginning pre-service teachers to analyse and consider their current beliefs and practices and position them for change. All early years teacher educators must consider such tools in their teaching. As Krieg (2010) suggests, it then enables teacher-educators to work together with classroom teachers and pre-service teachers to develop shared knowledge about teaching through rigorous, systematic inquiry. It positions pre-service teachers as active participants and contributors of new knowledge as well as change agents, thus assisting them to develop personal professional identities. If the quality of early years education is to improve, as teacher educators we need to realise the potential of pre-service teachers as agents of change based on developing current beliefs.

Further research into the beliefs of pre-service teachers is necessary to improve early childhood teacher education programs. This study has shown that 'romanticised views' still dominate in early childhood pre-service teachers. This view must be challenged in teacher education programs to help improve and support future early years teachers. In particular, future research is needed on effective strategies that challenge current beliefs and practices and position beginning pre-service teachers for change whilst maintaining high levels of self-efficacy. Such research needs to address building confidence and developing reflective practice, while making sure that early childhood teachers are also not overly confident to the detriment of their own understanding about their capabilities. According to teacher self-efficacy research, the four sources of efficacy (mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal) will help support the development of positive teacher self-efficacy beliefs (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). These sources of efficacy could be potential avenues for research to help challenge 'romanticised views' of early childhood teaching.

Conclusion

The current study provides a snapshot of the beliefs of pre-service early childhood teachers entering university. It does not claim to represent or generalise to the very diverse participants within early childhood education in Queensland or Australia. Rather, it is hoped that insights about the 'romanticised views of teaching' from this group of beginning pre-service teachers will be useful in informing effective teaching and learning within early childhood teacher education programs. It suggests that 'romanticised views' continue to dominate early childhood teacher education. For the quality of early childhood education to improve in Australia, early childhood teacher educators must consider working with the initial beliefs of early childhood pre-service teachers to help move away from the culture of a 'romanticised view'. At the institution where the authors work, strategies have been incorporated to spend greater time working with pre-service teacher beliefs.

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