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DESCRIBING STANDARDS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS: MOVING THE DEBATE FORWARD TO THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

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Abstract

In Australia, there is no set of agreed upon national teaching standards for early childhood teachers. In some states such as Western Australia and Queensland, documents have been produced that outline generic teaching competencies for all teachers. However, research in Australia and overseas shows that one set of standards does not always fit all teaching specialisations easily. This paper reports on the culmination of a joint research project between Edith Cowan University and the Department of Education (WA) that undertook to describe the generic teaching competencies for Phase 1 teachers in terms of early childhood teachers work. The views of early childhood teachers, specialists, principals and policy makers were sought in focus groups with the aim of providing rich descriptions of what WA early childhood teachers should know and be able to do in the first phase of their career. The study found that discussion and debate is needed at the National level in order to ensure the quality of early childhood teaching and to illustrate career pathways for early childhood teachers.

Background to the Study

There is no doubt that improving the quality of teaching impacts on the quality of educational outcomes for students (Ingvarson, 1998). Over the last decade the debate about teaching standards internationally and nationally has centred on the issue of raising the quality of

education in schools. Stemming from this debate has been the emergence of a

plethora of teaching standards frameworks. These include frameworks for subject specific certification (for example, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1995; Australian Science Teachers Association, 2002; Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers, 2002; Australian Association for the Teaching of English, 2002); generic teacher competencies (Martin, 2001) and initial teacher licensure (INTASC, 2002; NAEYC, 2001). These frameworks differ in structure and implementation, as they have been constructed for different political or professional use. A notable omission from the professional and political activity pertaining to the development of standards has been the early childhood sector.

In 2001 the Department of Education, Western Australia (currently known as Department of Education and Training) released the Teacher Competency Framework (Martin, 2001) into government schools. This was a generic teaching framework that described broad features of teaching across three levels for all teachers, teaching from Kindergarten to Year 12. The levels were on a continuum ranging from Level 1 to Level 3. Level 1 referred to the beginning stages of a teaching career, while Level 3 described highly experienced, exemplary teaching. Currently in Western Australia, teachers applying for Level 3 status commit to a portfolio submission and if successful, a

group interview. This is a promotional position while Level 1 and 2 do not (at this stage) have assessment criteria. The three levels address the same five dimensions but the indicators of effective practice are hierarchical and increase in complexity with each level. The dimensions of teaching are:

1. Facilitating student learning
2. Assessing student learning outcomes
3. Engaging in professional learning
4. Participating in curriculum policy and program initiatives in an outcomes-focussed environment
5. Forming partnerships with the school community (Martin, 2001).

There has been much discussion in the teaching standards debate about the need to articulate what counts as quality practice. If educational sectors are to claim greater involvement in the development of policy related to matters such as teacher preparation, performance management, registration and advanced certification then a set of standards would make explicit the core educational practices that teachers value.

In framing standards a contentious issue around the value of generic versus sector or subject specific standards has also emerged (Chadbourne, 2001). There appears to be consensus that there are some common elements in effective teaching but the demonstration of these elements would look different in diverse contexts. For example, the motivation techniques used by a Year 12 Physics teacher may look quite different from those used by a Kindergarten teacher. Ingvarson (2002) argues that generic teaching competencies do not show the differences in teacher's work and can leave teachers feeling deskilled. When the Department of Education and Training (DoET) released the Teacher Competency Framework (Martin, 2001) it was apparent that they had identified key elements of effective teaching practice but the document did not

explicitly describe the work of early childhood teachers. On consultation with DoET personnel, a joint research project with Edith Cowan University was set up to further explore Level 1 of the Teacher Competency Framework from an early childhood perspective.

It was in this context the study was undertaken. The goals of the study were:

- To make explicit the work of early childhood teachers
- To develop descriptions of early childhood teachers work from practising teachers to accompany the Teacher Competency Framework
- To collect teacher feedback on the Teacher Competency Framework for Level 1 teachers
- To consult with practising early childhood teachers in order to develop descriptions of their teaching practices.

The Study

Participants

A significant number of participants contributed to this study:

1. A Reference group of experts from the field. Key early childhood administrators and practitioners were invited to participate. This reference group met twice at the beginning of the study to consult on methodology and participatory considerations. The reference group consisted of representatives from the DoET Policy and Planning sector, the DoET Early Childhood Directorate, State School Teachers Union, Catholic Education Office and university sector.
2. Six focus groups of practising early childhood teachers from three metropolitan districts and two country districts. The participating teachers came from the following

DoET districts: Perth, Cannington, Fremantle, Peel and Northam. Participants were invited to attend through the district office network.

3. A Specialist group of early childhood teachers from diverse settings and in different stages of their career. Representatives were selected by reputation as leaders in their area of expertise and included, LOTE early childhood teachers, early childhood curriculum officers, Level 3 early childhood teachers, and educational administrators. This group met and worked for three days over six weeks, coming to each meeting with material reviewed or written in their own time. This core group assisted by writing the descriptions of teachers' work from the collated data and then reviewed the final draft.
4. Three focus groups of practising early childhood teachers from the Kimberley, Albany, and Geraldton reviewed the draft document adding a different contextual viewpoint.
5. Another group of 150 practising early childhood teachers was posted the draft document to comment on. The 150 teachers were drawn from the following districts: Esperance, Midlands, Goldfields, Kimberley and Cannington.

Overall, more than 300 practising early childhood teachers contributed to this study.

Method

This was a qualitative study that endeavoured to develop rich descriptions of the Teacher Competency Framework. It was a spiral process of action, collation, reflection and review, where the input of teachers was fed continuously into the next data collection point. Since this was a document mainly written by teachers for teachers it was important to have teachers

voices represented in this process. Therefore data collection techniques reflected this need. Data collection methods such as focus groups, surveys, taped conversations and written editorial comments were used to provide the rich descriptions.

Phases of the Study

The study proceeded in six stages over one and a half years.

Phase 1

A Reference group was convened and invited to comment on the methodology, participatory considerations and the survey instrument. A brief literature review was conducted on topics such as: Teaching Standards Frameworks, effective early childhood teaching and initial stages of the teaching profession.

Phase 2

In this phase, information was collected from practising early childhood teachers on the Teacher Competency Framework and their views on what Phase 1 early childhood teachers should know and be able to do. A total of six focus groups were convened in three metropolitan and two country DOEWA districts. Whole group and small group discussions with scribes were used as well as individual surveys.

Phase 3

The data collected from phase 2 was grouped under the five dimensions of the Teacher Competency Framework. Then in each of the dimensions, the information was clustered around common themes which emerged in order to ascertain the frequency of information given on certain aspects of teacher's work (see Table 1). This information, along with information from the literature review was given to the Specialist group (as described in Participants) who worked individually and then in groups to draft the initial document. Where a difference of opinion occurred

about information to be included or the degree to which the description was representative of a teacher at Level 1, a consensus was taken from the group. Once the document was drafted the group worked individually to edit and refine the draft. This was a cyclical process of draft, edit and review and was carried out over three full days in a six-week period.

Phase 4

During this phase the credibility of the document was tested. The draft was given to three country focus groups (in Albany, Geraldton and Kimberley) of practising early childhood teachers and district curriculum information officers to edit and review. Teachers worked individually and in small groups where conversations were taped and later transcribed. Documents with teacher's edits and comments were collected for scrutiny and to develop a further draft. This document and a comment sheet were posted to 150 early childhood teachers in 4 country districts and 1 metropolitan district. Teachers were asked to edit the document, comment on its validity for Level 1 teachers and return to researchers with a pre-addressed and pre-paid envelope.

Phase 5

The comments from the fourth phase were reviewed, collated and used to redraft the document. The specialist group was reconvened and the refined document and changes suggested by the teachers in Phase 4 were examined and accepted or after discussion rejected. The comments of this group have been used to refine the final draft document.

Phase 6

The final draft of the document will be completed and submitted with a report to the research partner.

Findings and Discussion

There were a number of outcomes from this research project, which directly related to the aims. Such outcomes included:

- the creation of descriptions for Phase 1 Early childhood teachers related to the Teacher Competency Framework;
- early childhood teacher's views about the Teacher Competency Framework (Martin, 2001);
- a network of professionals who participated in the development of the framework through a process of consultation and collaboration.

However, there were also some unintended outcomes, such as:

- creation of a set of core propositions about early childhood teaching;
- an explanation of the Level 1 stage of teaching for early childhood teachers;
- opportunities for early childhood teachers across the state to discuss early childhood career pathways and early childhood pedagogy;
- evidence of the notable absence of a standards framework suitable for the early childhood sector to monitor professional growth and career development.

Intertwined with these outcomes were a number of issues that impacted on the construction of the descriptions for Phase 1 early childhood teachers. They are discussed below:

Core Propositions

It became important when constructing the first draft with the specialist group that participants all shared a common understanding of what was meant by effective early childhood teaching. The group had to articulate aspects of quality early childhood teaching across the year levels of Kindergarten to Year 3 that are valued by teachers. The core areas explored were:

- Professionalism – early childhood teachers are committed to students,

- their families, their colleagues, their own learning and the profession;
- Professional knowledge and content knowledge – early childhood teachers are knowledgeable about theory, content and pedagogy;
 - Contextual influences – early childhood teachers take into consideration contextual factors that impact on planning, learning and teaching;
 - The environment – early childhood teachers know that the physical environment can affect the quality of the program;
 - Relationships – early childhood teacher value supportive and effective relationships; and
 - Reflective practice – early childhood teachers reflect on their practice and experiences for the purpose of professional improvement.

In the final draft it was agreed that these areas of early childhood practice represented core assumptions that underpin effective early childhood education.

Credibility

Research has shown that credibility and trustworthiness are important issues if the standards are to be accepted by teachers in the field (Maloney & Barblett, 2001). Credibility refers to whether the descriptive content of the standards do indeed identify accurately what teachers should know and

be able to do (Ingvarson, 2002). In terms of the Teacher Competency Framework, the majority of teachers (57) in Phase 2 focus groups thought that the five dimensions adequately covered teacher's work

In terms of the descriptive content of the early childhood document there was consensus throughout the study as to what appeared to be the important themes in each of the dimensions of early childhood teacher's work (see Table 1). The greatest area of contention came from the problem associated with defining a Level 1 teacher. All focus groups presented various interpretations of the degree to which a Level 1 teacher could demonstrate knowledge and skills described in the document. For example, one focus group in Phase 4 of the study argued that a Level 1 teacher would not possess a "*thorough knowledge of the Curriculum Framework*" but only a "*working knowledge*". Teachers in another focus group in Phase 4 said that there was too much in the draft document and that teachers in the beginning of their career were in "*survival mode*". When other teachers in the same focus group challenged them as to what could be left out, after a general discussion all agreed that nothing could be left out. As one teacher said in this group, "*standards should be used to help raise the quality of teaching not dumb it down*".

Table 1 – Common themes on aspects of Level 1 early childhood teacher’s work

Dimension	Knowledge, skills & values	
1. Facilitating Student Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Know Curriculum Framework (CF) & Student Outcomes Statements (SOS) Level 1&2 ∞ Know Developmental stages ∞ different learning styles ∞ Behaviour management ∞ Communicating with family ∞ Behaviour management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Understanding learning through play ∞ Flexibility ∞ Assessment ∞ Environment setup ∞ Consider individual-needs, rights, backgrounds
2. Assessing Student Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Standardised testing & recording- First Steps, ∞ Non-standardised assessment & recording ∞ Access to professional support ∞ Knowledge of child development ∞ Families contact & knowledge of families ∞ Variety of assessment strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Assessment is part of teaching/learning cycle ∞ Realistic expectations of children ∞ Knowledge of CF & SOS ∞ Collaborative planning ∞ Assessment for reporting ∞ Assess whole child as opposed to learning curriculum
3. Engaging in Professional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Evaluate own teaching practice ∞ Evidence that assessment is occurring ∞ Determine their strengths & weaknesses ∞ Child development ∞ Advocacy ∞ Moving to next level ∞ Curriculum coverage ∞ Establishing relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Performance management ∞ Reflection ∞ Establish goals ∞ Early intervention – consultation with others ∞ Pursuit of knowledge ∞ Acceptance /valuing feedback ∞ Risk taking ∞ Understanding of the CF
4. Participation in Curriculum policy and Program Initiatives in an Outcomes Based Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Know CF & SOS for level 1 ∞ Linking CF to domains ∞ Being part of learning area team ∞ Knowing what is relevant and appropriate to the age group, culture ∞ School priorities ∞ Ability to seek help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Willing to share ideas ∞ Value the child/parent ∞ Demonstrating and incorporating core values ∞ Self evaluation ∞ Interpersonal skills
5. Forming partnerships with the School Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Managing student behaviour ∞ Know your children ∞ Communication skills ∞ Appreciate diversity ∞ Program appropriate ∞ Collaborative planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Parents –reports, learning journeys, rosters, bulletin boards, newsletters, evenings, daily contact ∞ Contact with school ∞ Responding and accepting advice ∞ Confident communication ∞ Able to make students feel – supported, valued, respected

There were three content areas that did not appear in the generic framework that early childhood teachers from the Specialist group and the Phase 4 focus groups thought were important aspects of their work. One was advocacy for children and

their families, the second was advocacy for the profession and the third was professional ethics and responsibility. These areas may present a clash with DoET policies already in place. For example, teachers suggested the use of the

Early Childhood Code of Ethics (Australian Early Childhood Association, 1992) as a guide to ethical practice, but discussions with DoET, revealed that Western Australian government school teachers come under the Public Service Code of Ethics which takes a very different perspective.

Another issue that impacted on the construction of the early childhood document was the size of the document. It was important to describe the standards with rich descriptions, however, in order to encompass descriptions across different early childhood teaching settings, the document became dense. Therefore, the editing process became a vital part of each groups work in the last stages of the project. It was important to ensure the credibility of these standards, that it reflected the rich tapestry of teacher's views, as research has shown that such descriptions can empower teachers to reflect on and evaluate their own work (Maloney & Barblett, 2000).

Definition of Phase 1

The definition of a Phase 1 early childhood teacher was perhaps the most problematic issue confronting this research. The DOEWA document describes Phase 1 teaching

as :

"Teachers operating within Phase 1 test their professional knowledge and experiences in real contexts and develop their approach to teaching and learning through ongoing reflection on practice. With the support of colleagues, these teachers experiment with different approaches to teaching and learning as they work to establish professional credibility within the school community. While focus for teachers working within Phase 1 is on their own classroom environments, they are aware of and participate in broader school curriculum initiatives" (Martin, 2001, p5).

However, many teachers in the focus groups suggested that the Level 1 descriptions in the draft document and the standards framework were complex and demanding for a teacher in the first few years of their career. Many indicated that they thought it was too much to ask beginning teachers to be responsible for all these dimensions, one teacher wrote, "Each area is really covering a lot of things and would a beginning teacher be able to cope with all these things when they are really trying to "find their feet" and teach the children – what they were taught and trying to put this in practice." What was concluded was that Level 1 represented a standard against which teachers would first begin to monitor their performance and achievements be it early in their career or later. It was strongly suggested that the descriptive early childhood standards would be something that teachers would work towards.

Use of standards and implementation process

How the Teacher Competency Framework (Level 1 & 2) are to be used has not been decided as yet and was not in the terms of reference of this study, yet it was an issue that concerned many teachers participating in this study. Although the Teacher Competency Framework had been issued to schools first as a policy document and then relegated to a draft document for discussion, teachers who participated had not seen it or had discussions about it at the school level. Questions at focus groups centred on the use and implementation of such a framework. Many teachers welcomed the early childhood descriptions as a professional development tool accompanying the generic Teacher Competency Framework. Most teachers in Phase 2 and Phase 4 focus groups wrote that they would like to see the Framework used as a professional development tool. They envisaged that such a tool would assist early childhood teachers to identify areas for professional development in order to improve their practice. The majority of

participants in the focus groups in Phase 2 did not want the Framework used as a formal system of required accountability or performance management, as they were unsure who would have the expertise in their school to make judgements on their work. The focus group participants in Phase 2 were asked to identify from a list

who they thought would be most qualified to make an assessment of their work using the Teacher Competency Framework (see Table 2). It was interesting to note that participants in four out of five DoET districts had nil responses to the category of “Your principal”.

Table 2. Early childhood teacher’s views on selecting assessors.

Person	Number of responses
Yourself	19
A mentor within your school	30
Your principal	11
An independent assessor with early childhood experience	32
The early childhood curriculum officer attached to your school	8

Contextual issues

The early childhood teachers in the Phase 2 focus groups spoke about the diverse contexts that made up the educational settings representing the early childhood phase of schooling. They thought that this diversity could impact on the implementation of some generic competencies. Many believed that early childhood teachers did not have equal opportunity to demonstrate these dimensions in their work. Some reasons given were; “*the class size, the available resources, the level of school support, the community’s expectations, the SES of the school district*”; “*Time factor, setting/children; rapport or contact with parents/community services; knowledge exposure to student learning outcomes, cultural diversity, remoteness*”; “*School resources and school atmosphere*”.

By the end of Phase 4 of the study there was only one contextual issue that was a point of discussion. Some early childhood teachers commented about the descriptions of working in “*collaborative planning teams*”. One teacher from a remote two teacher school wrote, “*But for the junior area it’s just me!*” The Specialist group when viewing this comment changed the script to read “*Where contextually*

possible teachers work in collaborative planning teams”. Overall teachers appeared comfortable that with they would have equal opportunity to illustrate what they do using the early childhood descriptions.

Procedural credibility

The criteria for procedural credibility include, the independence of the researchers developing the standards, practising early childhood teachers primarily develop the standards, and the diversity of perspectives is represented (Invargson, 2002). These standards were written to describe Phase 1 Early childhood teacher’s work and therefore pertain to the Western Australian context. Over three hundred practising (DOEWA) early childhood teachers participated in constructing, writing or editing these descriptive standards. There were diversity of perspectives as all teachers were working in a range of contexts across the state but employed by the same government school system, therefore findings are restricted to this system. However, this study has convinced the researchers that it is time the notion of Early Childhood Teaching standards reached the national arena.

Moving the Debate to the National Level

Teaching standards across the world have shown to impact on teacher effectiveness and influence positive outcomes for students (Ingvarson, 1999). Standards show teachers how to become better at what they do so that learning takes place for teachers, not only students. The overwhelming response to this study was that teachers were appreciative of the chance to discuss their core business (teaching in early childhood settings), the issues around effective early childhood practice and career pathways. One teacher in the specialist group said: "This has been fantastic. A real treat to discuss what we do." Another said, "We are so busy doing, we often don't examine our work in a broader context". Research shows that this type of interaction whilst it is rare is perhaps the defining characteristic of good professional development (Ingvarson, 1998). Early childhood teachers across the nation are united in their core work of promoting positive outcomes for students and raising the status of the profession. A national set of standards would assist in raising the quality of early childhood education in Australia.

There are a number of positive reasons for National Early Childhood standards. They are:

- ∞ A framework that transcends all state and territory borders. In our transient society teachers move interstate and often find for example, their Level 3 (WA – exemplary teacher status) certification unrecognised. In the United States of America the NBPTS teacher status is recognised across the nation;
- ∞ Make visible, career pathways in early childhood teaching that involve teachers in their core business, work in classrooms;
- ∞ Community recognition of early childhood teaching and what it

entails. Such a set of standards would make explicit the work of early childhood teachers;

- ∞ Teachers could use the standards to monitor self improvement and plot professional development pathways to assist teachers to know what they need to do in order to become better teachers;
- ∞ Attract and retain talented graduates, as career pathways are made explicit;
- ∞ National benchmarks for quality assurance in the profession;
- ∞ "Professionalise" the work that early childhood teachers do;
- ∞ Inform teacher education to create some compatibility across the nation;

Achievements in other professions such as law, architecture and medicine have tangible accomplishments such as cases won, diseases cured or buildings well designed (Boston, 2002). The successes in teaching are not immediately tangible or well understood by the public. In the United States of America, the NBPTS quite deliberately uses teaching standards to raise the status of the profession by changing public perception of teaching (Ingvarson, 1998). The NBPTS participants have consistently commented on the value of a national system of teacher certification. Teachers have reported that the certification process increased their confidence, improved their teaching and augmented their ability to take on more leadership roles within the profession (Ingvarson, 1998). One of the reasons behind this is because of the rigorous assessment and validation system in place. It is clear that if Australia is to go down the road of a National Certification Board then we must look to the work of other nations. Then we must construct a clear vision with all stakeholders at the table. Research indicates that standards should be constructed alongside assessments and validations. While this Western Australian study is a start, it is not sufficient, as

standards need assessment and validations to be constructed alongside if they are to be valid and functional in the field.

In Australia, policy makers, research bodies and professional teaching associations have been debating standards frameworks for teachers at the national level over several years. The English Teacher's Association, Science Teacher's Association and the Math's Teachers Association have all won large ARC grants to develop national standards for teaching excellence in their respective fields. The Australian Education Union (AEU, 2002) supports the idea of National certification of teachers while the Australian College of Education has been active in promoting debate on this subject. Further, the Senate Report "A Class Act" requested a national system for teacher certification (Ingvarson, 2002). Yet the early childhood sector has remained quiet or uninvited to these discussions. This could be because much of this debate has been driven by powerful professional teaching organisations that are mainly represented by secondary subject and primary teaching interests. The early childhood sector does not have a National Teaching Professional organisation to promote its interests on the national stage. The early childhood profession acknowledges that the development of professional standards for early childhood teachers is perceived as an area of research need (Fleer, 2000). Yet without a prominent national early childhood teaching association to use as a platform there is no outlet for the professional push that is required.

Conclusion

This research project has enabled the researchers and participants to explore early childhood teaching in a constructive and productive way. It has enabled representatives from the field to voice their beliefs, understandings, knowledge and skills, to make these explicit for the benefit

of the profession. Describing quality practice has added credence to the early childhood specialisation and provided documented evidence for the public, administrators and policy makers. It is a beginning for a national debate on early childhood teaching standards that need to take place. As Ingvarson (1998) said, "Without standards a professional body is defenceless. A demonstrated ability to articulate standards for high quality practice is an essential credential if a professional body is to be taken seriously by the public and policy makers."

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