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PREFERRED MODELS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION

A WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood teacher education in Australia continues to be a topic of contention. The erosion of specialized early childhood courses during the early 1980s was indicated by Briggs (1984) in the face of new shared structures with primary teacher education. Restructuring of courses at that time was brought about by amalgamations of many higher education institutions which provided courses for teachers. At that time, the tertiary education sector began what has become the most significant post-war re-arrangement of higher education Australia has witnessed. Course developments in 1984 were illustrative of the kinds of amalgamations which were taking place and attention was on “rationalization” of many courses within the college sector as it moved towards university designation.

Today, early childhood teacher education courses are considerably different from those described by Briggs in 1984. On a national scale, connections with primary teaching courses have altered and much of the character of traditional early childhood preparation is again apparent.

However, the preparation of early childhood teachers in each State and Territory is now being challenged by new moves to restructure teacher education in this country and to develop a nationwide teaching profession (K-12) with national teacher registration, and national salary benchmarks and classifications. Early childhood teacher education in this exercise is subsumed in a teacher education model focused on the school as workplace.

The Australian Education Council Report on Teacher Education (1990) advocated directions for pre-service teaching courses which differ in notable ways from the style and composition of the present Australian Early Childhood programmes observed recently (Taylor, 1990). Now more than ever, is the time to document clearly the reasoning behind certain present early childhood course attributes and to consider critically what constitutes a sound preparation for early childhood specialists. National, system-wide changes to teacher education generally need to be instituted in full knowledge of the scope and diversity of teaching in the early childhood field and with recognition of the specialized needs of teachers of young children employed in a wider workplace than the school. Early Childhood Education nationally, spans child care, kindergarten and the early primary years.

Catering effectively for any group in teacher education requires giving attention to the specific contexts in which the group will operate and linking the programme to the dominant philosophies in the profession - early childhood, primary, or secondary. In particular, beliefs about the ways children differ at different ages think and learn and beliefs about what constitutes appropriate educational provisions for children in early childhood, primary and secondary years should impact on the design and implementation of teacher education programmes for teachers working in these sectors.

This paper outlines the features of early childhood teacher education considered important by early childhood teacher educators in Western Australia, where current courses differ in marked ways from those of other Australian States and Territories. Included are several issues for consideration, as these pertain to all Australian early childhood teacher education programmes and must be debated in the process of developing national responses about appropriate directions and provisions for Australian early childhood teacher education. The tensions between current reform plans (ASC, 1990) and present Australian early childhood programmes are also illustrated in some cases by reference to data collected by the writer (Taylor, 1990).

Early childhood teacher education in Western Australia (1990)

Because of known differences in early childhood programmes across the country, some attention is given first to highlighting factors about the Western Australian programmes which differ in substantial ways from early childhood. 

Vol. 16, No. 1, 1991
programmes in other places. One major difference relates to preparation for the care and education domains of the early childhood field. The three-year, and occasionally four-year, pattern commonly pursued) field experience is interspersed over the first three years with the largest concentration of fieldwork being in the third year age range. The way in which these roles are constructed will impact on the style of teacher education pursued. Present differing regulations governing care and early education in this country make arriving at consensus on any one teacher education model unlikely and, in the view of the writer, undesirable.

In Western Australia, care and education courses are separated. This partly accounts for the fact that current teaching courses at both Curtin University and Edith Cowan University continue to operate on a shared course structure with primary education although in each case, the subject is different and the links with primary vary in degree. Furthermore, the courses in both institutions are accredited to cover the three to eight year age range and the major employing authorities for early childhood teachers from both institutions are the Ministry of Education, the Catholic Education Commission and the Independent Schools sector.

There is also an historic component in the separation of care and education courses in Western Australia. Preparation for care positions was set up through Technical and Further Education (TAFE) which offered a Child Care Certificate course to candidates who completed Year 10 of the secondary school. Although this course was upgraded to Associate Diploma and Diploma levels, training for child care remains largely with the TAFE sector. There are, however, a small number of graduates also coming from a separate Edith Cowan University course in child care.

Regulations regarding children's services in Western Australia do include early childhood teachers as appropriate appointees to child care centres, but their roles relate to the provision of a three-year programme for children because their role does not have the formal preparation or practice in working with children. In the area of care and education Western Australia differs markedly from many of the early childhood programmes observed in other States. A second characteristic of early childhood in Western Australia is that all student teachers graduate with a Bachelor of Arts (Education), a three year degree, and have the option of remaining for a fourth year and completing a Bachelor of Education. (They may also return later, after gaining experience in the field, to complete a four year programme common to pre-service preparation of teachers. Some of the deliberations at this meeting are included in this paper and expanded by the writer to include a conceptualization of the basic requisites of a sound early childhood pre-service programme.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

(a) Birth to eight vs three to eight years.

The general principle of a birth to eight year focus is deemed most desirable, and Western Australia is following this principle, where possible, in present programmes. However, present courses are accredited to cover the three to eight year age span and the focus on preparing teachers for Ministry of Education and other similar positions impacts on how the birth to eight age span is covered. Any national consensus on a birth to eight year model or models would require a careful phasing in process in Western Australia.

At Edith Cowan University endorsement for planning a new birth to eight year programme has recently been given for the pre-service teaching course, but action on this will not take place until the programme is re-structured. In preparation, an advisory committee for the Edith Cowan programme has been broadened to include representation from care and community services areas of Western Australia. The structure of such a course has been established.

(b) Care and education

Given the present provisions for preparation of child care workers and early childhood teachers in Western Australia this State is not presently geared to set up a model of early childhood teacher education which has child care studies and practice as a major component. This is not to suggest disaffection with such a plan, but traditional patterns of employment, conditions and regulations in Western Australia do not reflect the needs of early childhood care and education areas call for a process of re-structuring and direction to be produced. This process is underway both in the university sector and in the State government departments. The writer for highlighting this as an issue is to stress the lack of commitment to any single model approach to early childhood teacher education in Australia. Discrepancies have endured from Canberra.

In summary, the WA early childhood teacher education programmes are distinguished from many other programmes in five ways. Currently they do not include child care studies or practice; they are accredited three to eight years; they contain a 10 week ATP, and they graduate three students after three years with a Bachelor of Arts (Education). Furthermore, students are employed predominantly by the Ministry of Education, with little or no contact with the general education sector. This allows an interinstitutional commission to occur and the lack of commitment to any single model approach to early childhood teacher education in Australia. Discrepancies have endured from Canberra.

In the literature surveyed, the issue of the balance of general (liberal or discipline) and early childhood programmes for students pursing early childhood teaching awards has advocates taking diverse stances. This diversity of opinion is also noted among early childhood academics in Western Australia.

In Australian teacher education generally, the past decade has revealed a shift within the cultural and social professionalism from the educational needs of teachers towards a specific focus on teaching outcomes, particularly as they relate to economic development. Considerable emphasis is
now placed on teacher appraisal and related changes in promotion criteria, and on the restructuring of teacher awards. Nevertheless, there is a lack of data other than school settings best fit teachers for the diverse roles they take have not produced sound directions in regard to the balance of general course work and professional studies.

The trend towards more general studies has been noted in several places. AEC Report proposals to increase general studies components in early childhood, primary and secondary courses assumes that teachers at all these levels need the same kind of preparation. It is ironic that Edsall argued in 1984 for a re-orientation of early childhood courses to give students 'a better understanding of and competence in interacting (with a variety of professional associates and family and community members) and called for family studies to form "the core of studies around which other studies (the curriculum and so called liberal studies, etc.) revolve" (1984, 37).

In the United States, Haberman (1988) reported the thrust of laws and policies being towards limiting pre-service professional studies and including more in-depth liberal studies. However, these policies and laws were also noted as equally excising early childhood and special needs teachers.

These developments support my contention that even in the midst of the trend to limit (or scrap) professional education courses there seems to be universal agreement, among even the critics of professional education that teachers that young children are somehow really different. They apparently need more professional education and, ipso facto, less general education and less specialization in some university major. (Haberman, 1988, 34-35).

How a programme should be composed with respect to general studies, education theory, and practical components depends on the kinds of roles for which a course is deemed to be prepared. No clear, well documented methods of obtaining optimum balance between general study, education theory and practical components has been given, as the writer’s view, been presented. Shulman (1986) calls for a more technical focus with a stress on subject matter and content knowledge. Doyle (1985) calls for a reflective approach with an intellectual framework for understanding class events. Early childhood teacher educators need to consider their priorities in preparing people for a diverse set of appointments and have debate on the relative balance of general and professional studies.

(e) Specialization within accredited age range

In Western Australia, no firm direction has been agreed in regard to the treatment of periods within the age span of an accredited course. As stated earlier, Western Australian courses are more narrowly focused on three to eight years at present. Considerations of how best to prepare students for a wide variety of work across the birth to eight year age range are now in progress. Of some assistance in this endeavour is the material and course details from programmes such as the one operating at Macquarie University (Waverley) where opportunities for specialization are well established.

Course structures which show regard to the continuing professional development of teachers of young children, through focusing the literature and the range of exposure of teachers to periods within the age span, for example, infant-toddler - birth to two years, kindergarten - three to five years, and early primary - five to eight years - have attraction in agendas charged with covering the birth to eight year span. These structures also fit well with the recommendations that police, 1975 and 1982 for early childhood teacher education courses. Nevertheless, all graduates from programmes covering birth to eight years should have a background which ensures skills across the range as well as specialist competency within the age range.

(f) Teaching practice vs field experience

One may be curious why this is deemed an issue, but visits made by the writer in 1990 to seventeen of the Australian early childhood programmes afforded an appreciation of different views on what constitutes practical experience. Presently, almost all formal field work in the Western Australian in different academic records is completed in preschools, preprimary centres and junior primary classes. "Teaching practice" encapsulates the kind of fieldwork students undertake. If one adopts a model of pre-service teacher education with the school as focus then this term fits well, but if models of teacher education are to account for more diverse areas of employment for qualified early childhood teachers, new terminology is needed. Early childhood education then the notion of "field education" is much more appropriate. Western Australian early childhood educators now endorse "field experience" rather than "teaching practice" so that field work in venues other than schools may be assumed as appropriate and necessary. Although limited provision exists, moves to provide field experience in contexts other than schools have yet to be developed. These moves also have implications for the funding of field experience programmes.

(g) Entry pre-requisites (including cultural diversity)

Debate on pre-requisite requirements for entry into teaching is underway in Western Australia. In response to the Beazley Inquiry in Education (1984), and the recent Discipline Review of Teacher Education in Mathematics and Science (1989), proposals have been put forward to set Mathematics pre-requisites for entry into all teaching courses. These proposals have prompted a wider debate on the qualities considered desirable in teaching candidates and exposed the need for a review of pre-requisites in all areas.

New directors on pre-requisites for entry to early childhood teaching are difficult to establish nationally because little attention to this area has been given in the recent literature. Early childhood professionals and academics involved with pre-service teacher education need to consider this in conjunction with the need to introduce a diversity of individuals into the field.

A recurring issue in the literature is the quality of people generally attracted to teaching. Although there is not supporting research evidence, at the early childhood level, the writer suggests that candidates tend to choose this area of teaching out of interest in, and commitment to young children and not, for example, primarily because they failed to win places in other tertiary courses. Indeed, a number of candidates who enter early childhood teaching programmes have attracted high grades in their previous studies.

Advocacy in a number of reports on teacher education, for example, "better people" being recruited to teaching generally, tends to be targeted towards attracting sound Arts and Science graduates to the profession. For example, in the United States, the Carnegie Report (1986) was seeking people of "substantial, intellectual accomplishment", for teaching and in Australia, the AEC Report highlighted the quality of student intakes as a problem and noted that "teaching does not attract anything like the appropriate proportion of school leavers with high levels of achievement." (1990, 15).

One of the unchallenged assumptions in views of this kind is how the connection is made between high levels of achievement of school leavers and future teaching performance. However, scores derived from testing at the end of secondary schooling, and subsequent quality of teaching performance. Furthermore, scores derived from performance at the end of secondary schooling may be produced using a narrow range of subjects as the base. The notion of a sound general education being necessary for future teachers may not be well served by end-of-year secondary-school scoring systems which allow for attention to very few subjects rather than assessing a broader, more balanced preparation.

Raths (1989) noted that one attribute of effective early childhood teachers was an ability to "read" their pupils. How this ability, for example, would correlate with teachers' previous academic achievement, particularly if this was derived from sampling few subjects, is unclear. The need to recruit into teaching those with a capacity for caring has been highlighted in a variety of places, and early childhood teaching in particular, may not benefit markedly from drives to recruit Arts or Science disciplinary specialists who attain high academic scores at the expense of recruiting students who have a deep interest in young children at the beginnings of learning.

In short, high academic achievers on 'brighter people' being recruited into teaching may have merit, but this kind of focus in the literature on teacher education and the improvement of teaching must be balanced with strong arguments that academic talent alone is not a sound predictor of quality teachers. Qualities of character, commitment to education, to teaching as a profession, and motivation to work with young children are also important variables. Raths' (1989) suggestion that teacher educators devote more attention to learning how to work effectively with the students in front of them rather than wishing for different students with different skills is worth considering.

Furthermore, the AEC report conditioned the concept of a degree followed by a teaching preparation course so that "well qualified graduates (of understanding course concepts) for teaching as a career." Present Diploma of Education courses have not been considered in this paper because this kind of course is not presently available in Western Australia at the early childhood level.
Another facet of the debate on the most appropriate format for early childhood education involves the issue of recruitment. Given the government's recognition of the need to recruit more early childhood professionals, the debate has moved beyond the problem which suggests that many of the pre-service teaching programs may not be preparing students adequately for the job. The dilemma is that too many potential students are being turned away despite the recognition of the need for more early childhood teachers. This has led to a situation where there is a shortage of qualified teachers in the field.

The "feed-forward" problem can also be linked closely with issues of attaining optimum, concurrent field experiences designed to integrate the theoretical components of a pre-service teaching course with practice. Debate about appropriate field experiences ranges from a need for argument for frequent, early, quality exposure of students to teachers and teaching (thus attempting to minimize the "feed-forward" problem), through to a complete avoidance of field experience because of many poor teaching models and the difficulty for students in effecting new educational ideas.

Early childhood teacher education in Western Australia faces the same dilemma of ensuring the quality of the early childhood teaching and the need for teachers to be able to meet the needs of all children. Such an approach should be supported by appropriate field experiences, which can be tailored to the needs of individual students.

Given that Australia is a culturally plural society, some attention to determining the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students in present courses in order to articulate any needs for recruitment of students can be productive. Arguments for ensuring access of minority groups to teacher education courses should be based on moral imperatives and a sense of justice rather than on any expression of need for an ethnic or cultural minority group to be taught by people from the same group.

(b) The "feed-forward" problem

The timing and sequencing of particular content and experiences in programmes of teacher education is as problematic as is the case with those of the "feed-forward" problem which suggests that many of the pre-service teaching programs are outdated. This is a dilemma that all education systems need to address if they are to meet the needs of students and the community. It is not enough to just assume that early childhood education is only about young children; it must also be about the needs of all children, including those with special needs.

The literature distinguishes early childhood education from primary education in that the former is concerned with the development of skills and concepts that are not relevant to primary education. These differences are often highlighted in the discussion of curriculum and educational policy. For example, there is a strong emphasis on developing academic skills in primary education, whereas in early childhood education, the focus is on social, emotional, and physical development.

Early childhood education services (including pre-service teacher education) may not traditionally been pre-occupied with establishing links to economic productivity or with making connections to many government policy directions, but these are now seen as essential. These links could become a useful tool for curriculum development and implementation.
FEATURES TO BE REPRESENTED IN MODELS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION

The issues canvassed in the above section highlight the complexity in producing workable models of early childhood teacher education. The notion of multiple models designed to suit a set of early childhood courses which have varied focuses according to regional needs has appeal in Western Australia.

Nevertheless, there is recognition that some attributes of teaching relate to all levels of education and require attention in all pre-service teacher education courses. For example, all Australian teachers work in a multi-cultural society, have professional needs regarding their provision of pastoral care in the work-place, the administration of centres and schools, and the development of productive relationships with the communities they serve. All teachers also have practical needs for appropriate educational spaces, materials and equipment, for reasonable group sizes and for recognition of their work and reward for effective participation. All teachers need opportunities for on-going professional development through appropriate in-service courses and variety in practical experience. How these common needs are translated into a teacher education programme becomes important because within this ‘common ground’ there should be scope for different developments for early childhood, primary or secondary.

The structure and content of present courses in any one State or at one level (early childhood, primary or secondary) cannot be seen as appropriate for other States or other levels without due consideration of the particular legislation governing local services and without defining the work practices of the different groups of teachers. Furthermore, community needs for specific types of services varies according to population locations, geography, cultural factors and the expectations of major employing authorities. These factors highlight the importance of diversity in pre-service teacher preparation courses offered in this country and, to some degree, they support the view that a system of teacher education should not be one dominant model but on many models according to locality and need is necessary for optimum provision.

In Western Australia, early childhood teacher educators confirmed the following features as fundamental to their “ideal” model of teacher education. The issues raised above and the refinement of these fundamentals were taken into account by the writer when developing the conceptual framework of the model which is presented in Figure 1. Clearly, directions taken on any one of these issues would impact on the way such a model is refined and implemented. The objective of the writer was to produce a conceptualization of early childhood teacher education fundamentals which allowed flexibility for educators wishing to implement such a model.

The central areas of child development, teacher development, and the early childhood interaction together in a focus on the world of the child and the provision of appropriate experiences. Set out below are the particular attributes of a teacher education programme which Western Australian early childhood educators deemed as significant.

(a) A sound background in child development
(b) An integrated and inter-disciplinary understanding of learning theory and practice
(c) Philosophical and historical foundations of early childhood
(d) Developmentally appropriate curriculum studies
(e) A grounding in principles and methods of teaching young children
(f) A developmental focus, birth to eight years
(g) A focus on the child within family within society
(h) Research and theory connected to ongoing relevant field experiences across the programme
(i) Interpersonal communication skills (including ethics) for effective, professional relationships with co-workers, parents, and children
(j) Academic studies in liberal arts, humanities, social and physical and behaviour sciences

In summary, all courses need to provide graduates with the foundation for a philosophy of teaching young children, a knowledge base of child development (birth to eight years), and basic competence in working daily with young children and their families. This provision may be established through academic coursework in both professional and general studies and through a variety of field experiences.

CORE COMPONENTS SUPPORTED BY WESTERN AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATORS

The components considered by Western Australian early childhood educators as relevant structural components for a model of early childhood teacher education which could be applied in Western Australia were as follows:

(a) Studies of development and learning
(b) Education studies
(c) Curriculum studies
(d) Field experience
(e) Interpersonal relations, professionalism and administration
(f) General Studies in the humanities and/or sciences

It should be noted that these core components are different from the components presented in place in the Curtin and the Edith Cowan University courses in Western Australia. Further, it is assumed that the instructional methods used in courses would ensure variety of experience as well as give support to the integration of theory with practice. The content of all courses should reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian communities which they serve and the staff and associates involved with the courses would model the high standards of ethical and professional behaviour expected in working with young children and their families.

A preferred pattern for early childhood teacher education, given the features and components described above, is a four year pre-service preparation with practical experiences interspersed throughout. The outcome of this preparation would be the award of Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood).

Conclusion

Although Western Australian early childhood teacher educators preferred certain features to be represented in any model of teacher education, it is possible for the preparation of teachers of young children, there is serious doubt that a single model of teacher education for all teachers, as presented by the Australian Education Council Report (1990), is realist or appropriate. Programmes preparing teachers for early childhood positions across Australia are presently broad ranging and reflect the diversity of early childhood services in the field. Any model of teacher education must reflect the needs of the community to which it is addressed.

Australia, there is a wide diversity of needs which supports the notion of diversity in the models of teacher education adopted.

Consideration of the issues presented in this paper and subsequent resolutions at the regional level would result in different focuses being taken in preparing teachers for work at the early childhood level. The writer considers the present diversity in early childhood teacher education as a positive feature which reflects the ability of teacher educators to take into account regional needs and issues when preparing teachers for professional roles. That early childhood teacher educators can learn from each other and maintain vibrant teacher education programmes by being aware of developments across Australia is apparent. However some degree of flexibility for programmes to be tailored to suit local needs is an important feature to maintain.