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Where to From Here? Career Choices of Pre-service Teachers Undertaking a Dual Early Childhood / Primary Qualification

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Abstract: Recent Australian government initiatives in the early childhood education and care sector are placing demands for an increase in the number of degree qualified early childhood teachers. Many universities are now offering courses with dual qualifications as a way to provide alternate career opportunities for pre-service teachers; however it cannot be assumed that an equal number of graduates will filter into both primary school and early childhood education jobs. This paper presents a study which examined the expected career choices of pre-service teachers from two Victorian universities who were undertaking a dual early childhood / primary qualification. The findings of the study have implications for teacher education curriculum design in relation to the practical components of courses. The authors therefore argue that more attention needs to be focused on the practical components of teacher training courses considering issues of quality and timing.

Introduction

With the change in government in 2007 in Australia the ‘productivity agenda’ surfaced which was underpinned by a firm commitment to increase investment in social and human capital as a way to strengthen the Australian economy. Education was seen as a key component of this agenda, with early childhood education and care (ECEC) receiving attention via a commitment to improve program quality. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) vision for 2009 that ‘all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’ (p 4), saw state and territory governments collaborate on a National Early Years Reform Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care. The assumption underpinning the Reform Agenda is that a more highly skilled workforce can make a difference to the quality of the services provided, and lead to better outcomes for children. For example, policy directives at the national level have led a strategy of universal access which strives to ensure that every child has access to 15 hours a week of a quality early childhood education program in the year before formal schooling begins, delivered by a degree trained early childhood teacher. A National Quality Framework has also been developed to raise quality and drive continuous improvement across all ECEC services. This framework mandates all childcare programs to employ a degree trained early childhood teacher. Research has shown that when early childhood educators hold higher level qualifications there is a greater chance of quality programs and better outcomes for children (Doherty, Friendly & Forer, 2002; Hill, Pocock & Elliot, 2007; Nyberg, 2007; Pugh & Duffy, 2009; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2011.)

These policy initiatives pose significant workforce challenges, such as increasing the number of degree qualified early childhood teachers required, and call for major sector

transformations (Productivity Commission Report, 2011). There is increasing concern in all education sectors across Australia about this country's ability to attract and retain quality educators to meet future workforce demands for all levels of schooling (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs - MCEETYA, 2005; Hartsuyker, 2007). This is an issue particularly across ECEC settings where there is a projected shortfall of 16,000 staff by the year 2014 (Productivity Commission Report, 2011). To meet this demand more early childhood teacher training places have been made available to Australian universities, many of whom offer dual sector teacher qualifications in both early childhood and primary teaching.

It is interesting to note that this is taking place at a time when the Higher Education sector is undergoing major reforms as it moves to a demand-driven model. Universities are no longer under obligation to continue to offer certain courses as they are now funded on actual student enrolments. This means that it is more likely for universities to focus on courses and disciplines that are 'attractive to students,...can easily be taught within the funding available for that discipline, and in which they already employ, or can easily recruit, sufficient numbers of academic teaching staff' (Productivity Commission Report, 2011, p.247). Early childhood courses tend to have lower numbers of students which make them more costly per student. As the Productivity Commission Report (2011) points out, primary teaching is a more attractive business option than early childhood teaching. This may be why we see early childhood teaching being offered as part of primary teaching degrees as in the past it has been difficult to justify offering specialist degree level courses (Elliot, 2007).

While it is anticipated that a considerable percentage of these pre-service teachers undertaking a dual degree will elect to work in the early childhood sector on graduation, anecdotal evidence suggests that a career in the early childhood sector is not the preferred choice of many of these students. The study reported in this paper sought to collect empirical data about the perceptions of pre-service teachers' in dual qualification courses as to their employment destination, in the hope of gaining insight into the reasons impacting on these career choices.

Literature Review

According to the literature, the choice of teaching as a career can be influenced by intrinsic reasons related to the individual's wishes, extrinsic reasons related to characteristics of the job, and altruistic reasons related to social contribution (Bastick, 1999; Harm & Knobloch, 2005; Jugovi, Maru, Pavin & Vizek, 2012; König & Rothland, 2012). However, as Watt and Richardson (2007) point out, various operationalisations of these motivations 'have resulted in a lack of definitional precision and overlapping categorizations from one study to another' (p.168). For many there is the need to 'positively make a difference in the lives of children' (Moran, Kilpatrick, Abbott, Dallat, & McCune, 2001, p. 18), and a love of and desire to work with young children that brought them to train as teachers (Moran, Kilpatrick, Abbott, Dallat & McCune, 2001; Torquati, Raikes & Huddleston-Casas, 2007; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Personal experience as students, consisting of interactions with and exposure to various teachers throughout school life, also is seen as an influencing factor for seeking a career as a teacher (de Leon-Carillo, 2007). The influence of positive prior teaching and learning experiences have been shown to be significant, after intrinsic value, social utility value and perceived teaching ability are considered (Watt & Richardson, 2007). What has become evident from the work of Watt and Richardson (2007) is that constructs such as intrinsic value, defined as individuals' interest and desire to become a teacher, and ability beliefs (expectancies for success, Eccles, 2005) about own ability and competence to perform expected tasks, are important influences on career choices. The motivation literature also attests to this and has a significant focus on these constructs.

Extrinsic factors relate to salary, job satisfaction, the perceived status of teachers and career prospects, and schools as a favourable working environment (Moran et al., 2001), and can act to make teaching a less attractive career option (Watt & Richardson, 2008). For example the professional status of teachers in early childhood settings is not held as highly as that of teachers in other education settings, nor of other professions (de Leon-Carillo, 2007) with a widespread perception that teachers who work in childcare are not 'real' teachers (Sumsion, 2007, p. 314). Teachers in early childhood settings, while holding a similar four year qualification as their primary school colleagues, do not receive the same levels of pay and employment conditions. If working in childcare, they often don't have access to the school term breaks and they can be working a minimum eight hour shift, which is rostered across the hours of the centre opening. These teachers have responsibility to act as pedagogical leaders and manage and support staff. They also have larger numbers of children to plan and design individual learning programs for due to the nature of the varied patterns of attendance at childcare centres. The pay and conditions result in high staff turnover and are seen as a disincentive for taking up employment (Ackerman, 2004; Torquati et al., 2007).

Osgood's work (e.g. 2004; 2010) in the UK highlights that a focus on professionalisation of the ECEC workforce is essential if we are to understand more about the ways in which reforms are conceptualised and implemented (Osgood 2004; 2010). So while there is 'widespread support for the potentially beneficial consequences of heightened professionalism for practitioners, and the children and families that they serve' (Osgood, 2004, p.5), a greater understanding about the ways in which early childhood professionals perceive their roles and identities is fundamental for strengthening both respect for professional ECEC workers, and flexible capacities to do the work (Osgood, 2004; 2010). As Woodrow (2007) cautions, the most recent developments in the Australian regulatory context, with the emergence of increasing surveillance and regulation, have the potential to impact on the professional identity, status and preparation of the ECEC workforce. Added to this is the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce as highlighted within the recent government initiatives as an essential component for quality in the sector (pwc, 2011). Bretherton (2010) suggested that such government initiatives 'are seeking to supply the sector with 'new' forms of workers' within a 'higher-skill operating model' (p.8), and observes, these initiatives provide 'scope for the sector to shift from a path of skill atrophy toward a path of skill growth...along with the scope for professionalization' (p.8). The difficulty is in attracting and retaining qualified staff, in services where pay is low, there is no set career path, and poor working conditions prevail (Brennan, 2011). As Osgood (2006) noted, 'professionalization could lead to a strengthened position and increased respect for those who work in early childhood education and care' (p.5).

Methodology

In an effort to broaden the data set on pre-service teacher career perceptions, this study was undertaken at two Victorian universities that offered dual early childhood/primary teacher qualifications. (Ethical approval from both participating universities was sought before the study commenced.)

Students currently undertaking the dual qualification were surveyed across the two institutions during 2010, with questions taken from a previous pilot study conducted with a small group of pre-service teachers. The anonymous survey asked each student cohort questions relating to their career aspirations and potential influences on these aspirations, critical decision points, and the factors impacting on their decision making. The survey was designed to gain both quantitative and qualitative data. Apart from the questions collecting demographic information, most questions were open-ended requiring short written responses. Pre-service teachers, in all year levels of the courses, were invited to participate in the survey

in order to gain a relatively substantial response for reliability of reporting. In total 476 surveys were distributed with 210 usable surveys returned. This represented a 44 percent return rate overall. The responses were distributed across the year levels of the courses as follows: First Year – 99, Second Year – 99, Third Year – 11, Fourth Year – 1. The reason for the low numbers in the latter years was due to the newness of both courses. For example at one university the course was new and the initial intake had been low resulting in low graduate numbers of the first year level through the qualification. For the other university only the first and second years of the course had been rolled out at the time of the survey. Most of the participants had no previous post-secondary qualifications, however for the small number who did hold qualifications these were predominately located in the Children's Services area such as holding a Diploma of Children's Services. It should also be noted that 74% identified that they had been involved in some capacity, either in a formal or informal way, in working with children.

The data were analysed using a prepositional / content analysis approach as a way to identify themes within the data according to each of the sub-headings used in the surveys – reasons for choosing a course, current career aspirations, influences impacting on current destination decisions, and reasons that could impact on future career decisions. A content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was carried out on the data sets utilising Henri's thematic unit of analysis to allow for the extraction of the meaning from the text without the constraint of word, sentence or paragraph limitation (Herrington & Oliver, 1999). Therefore in coding the data sets, the 'unit of meaning' could vary from a single word to a sentence or paragraph to a theme. The coding was not predetermined instead it evolved during the analysis stage. What is presented in this report are the themes where the richest data was available which were then aligned under the sub-headings of the survey questions.

Findings

Reasons for Choosing a Dual Qualification

Participants were asked to nominate their initial reasons for choosing to study the early childhood/primary qualification at their current university. Whilst there were a range of responses such as the reputation of the course, not wanting to be a secondary school teacher, and seeking a new challenge, a significant number responded that they wanted to work with children and so were attracted to a dual qualification. Some pre-service teachers responded that they 'wanted to be a teacher' or 'wanted to teach', however, did not specify the type of teacher (early childhood or primary). Just over 10% specifically stated wanting to be a primary teacher with less than 5% of participants identifying that they wanted to work as an early childhood teacher and had chosen the course for this reason.

Current Career Aspirations

When asked their career choices in the current stage of their course, just over 50% of pre-service teachers indicated a desire to work as a primary school teacher and approximately 25% specifying early childhood teaching as their first choice. In analysing the responses to the survey it became apparent that most of the participants with previous children's services qualifications (those who entered through a pathways program into the second year of the courses having already completed a Diploma of Children's Services) elected primary school teaching as their preferred career choice. Having prior qualifications in any discipline area was also strongly associated with choosing primary teaching as a career destination at the point of data collection. It is interesting to note that at this stage in their training just under one quarter were undecided about their destination.

Influences Impacting on Current Destination Decisions

In order to examine the influences impacting on the participants decisions as to their career aspirations, the data were separated into responses arising from each of the two universities. The data from University One was spread across all year levels (although the 3rd and 4th years of the course only represented 5.7% of the total responses), whilst University Two responses comprised of pre-service teachers in the first two years of their course, as this course was new and had only been operating for two years. The participants from University One experienced a more diverse range of practical placements than those at University Two. For example at University One students in the first two years of the course experience practical placements in both early childhood (community playgroups and childcare) and primary (to a lesser degree) settings whereas at University Two they undertake only an infant-toddler practical placement in their first year and a preschool practical placement in the second year. The variance and diversity of the practical placements need to be noted as there was a strong influence of the practical placement / mentor role reflected in responses. Overall, responses indicated that the placement and or the mentor teacher, in the placement setting, have the biggest influence on career aspirations (University One - 50% and University Two - 40%), whilst other responses were fairly evenly divided between the influences of volunteer / work experience, the lecturers, family and friends, pay and conditions, children in general and wanting to have a positive influence on a child's life.

When asked to indicate whether their career aspirations had changed since commencing the course, just over 30% indicated that this had been the case, sighting the practical placement as the most significant reason for the change. The pre-service teachers responded that on practical placements they built their confidence, were able to put theory into practice, had their original career choice confirmed, became more determined to teach due to the experience, increased their general knowledge of teaching, and developed a stronger awareness and understanding. The following examples illustrate the responses:

'I had a negative experience in the school but this gave me the desire to teach to improve the current standard in schools';

'I have not enjoyed the childcare placement but I possibly should work in childcare to improve the quality of care';

'The placement has given me an idea of how my workplace will be';

'The placement in early childhood showed me that I do not want to work in early childhood';

'I really enjoyed working with the 0-2 year olds. I didn't realise how much I would enjoy working with babies';

'I am now more aware of available options';

'I decided I may not be able to cope with children in early childhood'.

It is interesting to note that whilst the practical placement may have been quite challenging for some students, this acted to inform their proposed career choice as at least two of the responses indicated a desire to work in the particular sector to improve standards as a result of the negative experiences encountered during the placement. A number of responses from University Two (13%) indicated they had changed their mind to possibly considering working in the early childhood sector. However, it must be noted that these students were still to undertake placement in a primary school. On the other hand, across both universities 13% of respondents indicated that they had changed their mind from wanting to work in early childhood to now having a preference to work in a primary school setting.

The role of the mentor or supervising teacher during the practical placement experience was also an influential factor. A number of pre-service teachers (17% of responses) commented how spending time and talking with mentors had influenced their career aspirations with comments such as *'The teacher was welcoming and inspiring'; 'I was*

influenced from my talks with mentor teachers’; and ‘The placement allowed me to apply my learning, see other professionals working and I was able to talk to them’ representative of the responses. The influence of a mentor was not just that of the supervising teacher, but many responses also identified lecturers and other teachers as having a strong influence on career aspirations. *‘Lecturers & tute teacher are fantastic’; ‘inspired by great teachers’; ‘Lecturers at (uni) and teachers at placement’.*

Influences Possibly Impacting on Future Destination Decisions

As the courses these pre-service teachers were undertaking gave them a dual qualification, their openness to changing their mind about their initial and subsequent career choices and destination was also investigated. Whilst there were a number of pre-service teachers who did not feel they would change their mind under any circumstances (University One - 40%, University Two - 22%) due to pay, conditions and professional recognition, there were many students open to this possibility. When asked if they saw themselves changing their mind about their career choices, approximately 22% of the pre-service teachers at University One and 34% at University Two responded positively. It is worth noting that at both universities there was a significant percentage of pre-service teachers who answered ‘maybe’ to this question (University One - 34%, University Two - 37%). If these two categories are combined we see that 56% of pre-service teachers at University One and 71% of pre-service teachers at University Two could be open to change. Life style, enjoyment and work-life balance were significant factors noted in the responses. Respondents saw that having the dual qualification gave them greater options. These options have been presented by comments such as:

‘I expect to work in both kindergarten and primary as I will get bored staying in one setting’;

‘I expect I will want to change work settings as my own children grow up’;

‘I will have a dual qualification which will give greater flexibility and I will be able to change jobs in future. If I do not enjoy the job I will be able to change’.

Discussion

With the attraction and retention of early childhood teachers soon to reach a critical point nationally (Productivity Research Report, 2011), it is important to consider the ramifications of this study’s findings for teacher training institutions which offer courses where graduates exit with dual teaching qualifications across the early childhood and primary sectors. Due to the significant number of pre-service teachers who are ‘undecided’ about their career path on entry and during the course, it is worth considering this group as a target group to maximise the impact of any program that aims to produce more early childhood teachers as an outcome. This purposeful targeting of these students throughout their training could be approached through building and supporting the practical placements and examining the role of the mentor during these times.

The role of the pre-service teacher practicum has been highlighted in the literature as a key factor impacting teachers’ careers, having a profound effect on creating both positive and negative beliefs towards teaching practices and acting as an important catalyst for changing pre-service teachers perceptions (Atay, 2007; de Leon-Carillo, 2007; Recchia, Beck, Esposito, & Tarrant, 2009). This sentiment is echoed in the study reported in this paper where the impact of the practical experience had the potential to change career destinations. A significant number of pre-service teachers found the positive nature of the placement strengthened their career choice, whilst more negative placements created a mixed response.

For some participants this reaffirmed their desire to bring about positive change in the sector, whilst others saw this as a reason to change their choice. Similar to this study, Moody (2009) also found that 'a positive practicum is likely to impact on self-confidence, attitudes towards teaching and learning and a willingness to enter the teaching profession' (p 157). However, a negative practicum has also been found to influence pre-service teachers' perceptions of a career in teaching leading to a change in aspirations for career choices (Torquati et al., 2007).

Awareness must be paid to the progressive nature of decision making. For example with each passing year level of the course it does appear that more pre-service teachers decide to move towards a career as a primary school teacher. Many responses from University Two indicated that their current thinking about career destination may change after having undertaken a placement in a primary school, which in this course are the only placements undertaken over the last two and half years of study. Given the proportion of pre-service teachers who identified the readiness to review their preference as a consequence of placement, programs which aim at encouraging pre-service teachers to view a career in early childhood as a viable option should consider the timing of the early childhood placements. The timing of the early childhood placements appear to be of vital importance in determining the career aspirations, therefore it would seem crucial to have pre-service teachers undertake early childhood placements in the final years of the course rather than have all early childhood placement experiences during the early stages of the course as occurs in University Two.

The content and focus of the early childhood placements need to be specifically focused on the important role an educator plays in the learning of young children. Attention needs to be placed on the professional responsibilities of a teacher working in early childhood contexts to ensure it is presenting as a strong career choice. Tying assessment criteria of placements to wider frameworks, for example the Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations - DEEWR, 2009), the State early childhood frameworks and curricula, and the Code of Ethics and similar documents, will assist pre-service teachers to make links between outcomes for themselves as professionals as well as outcomes for the learning of the children they teach. The focus must be on the pre-service teacher as a 'teacher' and 'professional,' and expectations of the practical experience must mirror (as far as possible) those required on primary teaching placements. During the practicum the supervising teacher also plays a crucial role in influencing the career perceptions of the pre-service teacher as well as having a strong influence on the developing teacher as a professional (Moody, 2009; Norris, 2010). A positive and reciprocal experience with a supervising teacher who acts as a mentor in providing emotional and psychological support, as well as pedagogical guidance and classroom management advice, has been identified as a strong factor in building the confidence of beginning teachers (Brown & Danaher, 2008; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Moody, 2009). This was also true of the study reported in this paper, where the pre-service teachers were influenced by the actions of their mentor teachers. Placements must be secured where pre-service teachers can access quality experiences supported by experienced teachers as this will help build the notion of professional identity. The formation of professional identity as a teacher has been linked to the role of discourses in making certain constructions of teacher professionalism legitimate whilst excluding others (Sachs, 2001; Ball, 2003). As Hughes (2002) suggests discourses 'shape who and what we are...and what we might become' (pp.3-4). Choices are derived from sets of practices or from what has been experienced previously i.e. traditions, and these privilege particular sets of meanings of what being a teacher is (Coldron & Smith, 1999). A more systematic approach to the issue of practical placements across universities is warranted.

While the quality of the placement site influenced pre-service teachers thinking about career choices, the level of mentoring and the form that this takes throughout the course should also be examined so that pre-service teachers feel supported whilst on placements but

also during their time at university. Mentoring is viewed as an effective professional model for supporting early career early childhood teachers and a commonly utilised strategy when support is needed (Mayer & Nolan, 2008). In acknowledging the importance of mentoring in influencing career choices found in this study, we suggest the inclusion of strong mentoring components tied to the early childhood sector which continue throughout the program, especially during the primary placements as a way of maintaining the link to early childhood. Aligning students with early childhood mentors who are currently working in the field provides a professional link enabling pre-service teachers to come to understand the roles and responsibilities expected of early childhood teachers. This heightened awareness of the professional identity and professionalism of these teachers could act to increase respect for the work that they do in early childhood education contexts (Osgood, 2006). Mentors can introduce pre-service teachers to professional networks further highlighting the professionalism of the workforce.

Conclusion

Whilst the limitations of this research study must be acknowledged such as the containment of the sample to two institutions both with new courses, and the relatively small sample size, especially in the later years of the courses, the research nevertheless yields sufficient evidence to provide a good basis for future directions and recommendations for course development. With government initiatives firmly focused on increasing the number and quality of the early childhood workforce, it is timely that teacher education courses take up the challenge of promoting early childhood as a viable career choice and consider the recommendations as outlined in the paper.

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