

What does being an early childhood 'teacher' mean in tomorrow's world of children and family services? (Free full text available)

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Margaret Sims

University of New England

Introduction

On 7 December 2009, the Council of Australian Governments announced the new National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care (see www.mychild.gov.au). One of the changes involves the requirement, by 1 January 2014, for an early childhood teacher to be in attendance in services, and for at least 50 per cent of staff to have, or be working towards a diploma-level (or higher) qualification (COAG, 2009). There are few who would argue that appropriately trained early childhood professionals are unnecessary for high-quality service delivery. However, training is not best represented by pre-service qualifications alone. Teachers' practice is influenced not only by their pre-service training but by their values and the experiences they have had subsequent to graduation (Kennedy, 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008).

Despite this, research demonstrates that higher levels of training improve service delivery (Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Early childhood staff with more training engage in warmer and more responsive interactions with children, leading to improved child outcomes (Connor, Son, Hindman & Morrison, 2005). More training increases the likelihood that staff will be less authoritarian, less punishing, more sensitive and more able to demonstrate positive interaction styles (Abbott & Langston, 2005; Arnett, 1989; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford & Howes, 2002; de Kruif, McWilliam & Ridley, 2000). When training is coupled with on-the-job support, such as mentoring (Fiene, 2002), significant improvements in children's outcomes are more likely to be demonstrated.

Early childhood services are evolving and changing as we learn more about the importance of the early years, and the contexts in which we can best support children's development. There is no doubt that early childhood professionals of the next decade will be undertaking different work in many ways than early childhood professionals of today. They will be working in different contexts with children whose needs are shaped by the changes in the world in which they live. It is essential to ensure that professionals working in these children's services of the future (and in this I include childcare programs, preschools and parent-child centres/early childhood hubs) are trained appropriately for the work they are expected to do. In this paper, I discuss my vision of early childhood work of the future and the training that I believe is necessary to prepare professionals to undertake that work. In embarking on this task, I acknowledge the substantial work undertaken around preparation of teachers, and the impact of teachers' practices on children's outcomes (for example, Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts & Morrison, 2008). However, the focus is not on this work as such, but on my vision of the future directions of early childhood and what that means for pre-service preparation of the professionals working in this evolving field.

Early childhood services of the future

I believe that high-quality early childhood services are services in which each child's individual needs are respected and provided for as a matter of course. They are services based on secure relationships between children and their carers/teachers, and between parents and carers/teachers; where family needs are met. They are services embedded in the local community, and thus representative of the local community and the families living there. Staff see themselves not simply working with children, but having responsibilities towards families and the community in which they are located.

In parent-child centres/early childhood hubs, high-quality service delivery will revolve around the triple responsibilities of workers towards children, parents/families and the community. Some early childhood professionals in these services will be explicitly working with parents/families (for example, in family support, or parent education programs) while others will have more of a focus on children (for example, long day care programs, transition to school programs). The range of

programs operating out of these centres will depend on the needs of the specific community in which each is located, and may include playgroups, parent support groups, and inclusion support programs. There may also be other programs operating out of the centres (such as drug/alcohol programs, family violence programs, supervised access programs etc.).

What knowledge and skills do early childhood staff need to work in these services?

My argument is that early childhood staff will need a grounding in community work, as well as expertise in early childhood/family work, in order to adequately fulfil their responsibilities to children, parents/families and the community. I recently undertook a series of interviews (as part of a course review) to identify what existing children's services workers thought made an ideal children's services worker and I present some of these ideas here to inform my discussion. This was a very small consultation (a random sample of 15 graduates of the community work course at Edith Cowan University and nine major community work agencies in Perth, working with children and families in a variety of roles (Sims, 2008)).

Participants were clear about the things they thought were important in a good children's services worker. They thought personal attributes were as important as skills and knowledge:

... and passion that comes from the spirit rather than just a passion to providing a good-quality service. I think anyone can do that. Making people see beyond the quality and into the stuff that makes a difference. And that is what good-quality training brings into the sector, it doesn't shut down that bit that engages people's spirit (Agency 7).

Other professional behaviours and attributes included:

- the ability to work independently and self-start (Agencies 2, 4 and 7)
- a willingness to learn (Agencies 2, 9)
- the ability to problem solve (Agency 5)
- commonsense (Graduate 15) and a balance between enthusiasm and what is do-able (Agency 2)
- an understanding of confidentiality (Graduates 13, 15): An integrated early childhood service worker said: '... clients don't want to be acknowledged in the street. It's humbling for them to come to the service' (Agency 4).

The importance of interpersonal relationships, and the social skills necessary to build these, was strongly emphasised. Empathy is an important component of this (Graduates 2, 15): 'You need to have empathy, helping them, almost walking alongside them' (Graduate 14). A non-judgemental approach is also linked to this (Graduate 14, Agency 7): '... the ability to see things from other people's perspective and bring them on board and work collegially, to get things across in a non-threatening way' (Agency 5). Associated with this is a particular approach to working with people, a strengths-based approach (Agency 3): 'You've got to work with what they have, not what you think they have, or you will set them up to fail' (Graduate 14). Good communication skills were seen as fundamental (Graduates 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, Agencies 1, 2, 4, 5):

Strong interpersonal skills are a must, you need to know how to listen to people ... You don't necessarily have to be an expert in whatever problem they are in but, if you can listen, they feel as if they are listened to and that you are a good community worker (Graduate 9).

Communication skills also involve the ability to work as part of a team (Agency 2, 6) and working collaboratively across agencies and teams (Agency 3). Early childhood/family community workers use their interpersonal skills to build networks, partnerships and to identify resources and assets (strengths) they can use to assist in their work (Graduates 2, 6, 10, 11, 13, Agencies 1, 11): '... aware of what is needed in the community through reading and listening and translating that into supply and demand ...' (Agency 1). This links to an awareness of the 'bigger picture' (Graduates 6, 9, Agency 1):

... see the big picture as well as see how the other things hang together, like how the money sits, economic justice. To be able to see the big picture, to see how the bit that they are concerned about fits in with that, and make it work for them (Agency 7).

Knowledge of the bigger picture often comes out of an academic background, and participants identified a range of academic skills and knowledge that should be possessed by good early childhood/family community workers. Academic knowledge in relation to community work included:

- attachment and theories of child and adult development, the importance of the early years (Graduates 1, 5, 15, Agencies 3, 5)
- mental health (Graduate 15, Agency 2)
- family dynamics/ working with children and families (Graduates 1, 7, 14, Agency 8)
- social disadvantage and social issues, prejudice and anti-bias (Graduates 8, 13)
- community development (Graduates 5, 10)
- empowerment and difference, social role valorisation/normalisation (Graduate 8)
- crisis intervention and conflict management (Agencies 2, 9)
- counselling knowledge (Agency 8)
- culture (Agency 3)
- advocacy (Agency 2)
- working with addictions (Agency 2)
- family violence (Agency 2)
- para-legal knowledge (Agency 2).

In addition, participants identified that one aspect of early childhood/family community work includes how to write submissions and reports (Graduates 2, 9, 11), and that such activities required some formal academic skills, including:

- undertaking research—finding information (Graduates 2, 6, 7, Agencies 7, 8):

‘... knowledge of surveys and questionnaires ... evaluation is useful in providing reports to funding bodies and part of it is also linked to accreditations and meeting standards’ (Agency 8)
- presenting that research in written form (Graduates 6, 8, 9, Agency 8):

‘... referencing and writing essays is a skill I have had to use for my projects’ (Graduate 8)
- writing policy (Agency 8)
- computer literacy skills (Graduate 2).

These academic skills can be translated into management/administration and leadership roles. Early childhood/family

community workers in management/supervisory roles need to ‘... know about the administrative side. They should be able to see themselves as a leader in ... to be confident about it. What does leadership look and feel like?’ (Graduate 5). This includes a range of tasks, such as supervision of staff (Graduate 5, Agency 8), meetings (Agencies 1, 7) and record keeping (Agency 1).

Participants offered a general vision of the future:

The next five to 10 years we are entering a difficult time but with that there are opportunities to do things differently. I do think that this sector is too used to looking to other people and other sectors to do the leadership. We do not believe in ourselves, we are not training ourselves to find the answers and to put them out there and to be leaders. We have built business paradigms around governance. This is a female sector, we do women’s work from a feminist perspective and we are not taking this into consideration when we are looking at the solutions. We are constantly trying to adapt our solutions to fit ... We are still in the process of listening and engaging and creating spaces for people to talk and letting the consumers set the answers and to work with that type of model, rather than government or business to set the policy framework (Agency 7).

In following this idea of creating new, reflective early childhood/family community workers who take on a role in shaping a new world, the participant from Agency 7 suggested that training was a key factor:

The temptation is that training will teach people to be good managers. And, it will be pragmatic, realistic and will teach people the skills that prepare them for the real world. That’s the danger. I think the community sector needs leaders, prepared to talk different narratives and point to things that don’t fit. Be able to listen to the heartbeat of the community, make sense of it and voice it. Teach people to be leaders and companions rather than manage widgets and bits that make the system work. I think the sector is crying out for leaders and the temptation for training is to go for what is suitable and measurable. I think the university has to be a leader in this and has to engage with organisations that are prepared to talk about this. That they will be turning out students that will be asking questions and not students that want to give an answer before they even finish listening to the question (Agency 7).

What does this mean for training?

Our early childhood/family workers of the future will need a different toolkit of skills and knowledge than those currently provided in many courses and universities around the country if they are to succeed in driving change and creating a new world of high-quality services for young children and their families. I propose a model whereby early childhood/family workers receive a common core, consisting of attitudes, knowledge and skills around community work/early childhood and family work. We may even choose to call our new professionals ‘early childhood/family pedagogues’ in a similar manner to the Danish model (Oberhuemer, 1998), rather than early childhood teachers. In addition to the common core referred to above, workers then choose a specialisation that will enable them to focus on different aspects of the work for example, teaching, management, counselling, parent education and support, addictions, multicultural and/or Indigenous service delivery. Specialists may have particular titles for example, undertaking additional study in teaching would result in a qualification for ‘early childhood teachers’ as in Norway (Rhedding-Jones, 2005). Thus, we will create a team of early childhood/family workers, each with different knowledge and skills (but sharing an underlying philosophy and core understandings), who together can offer a holistic, wraparound service to the children, families and communities with whom they work.

We could have clear training pathways that enable students to have flexibility and choice, while operating to improve overall workforce skills and knowledge. For example, we could continue to offer relevant vocational education and training (VET) diplomas focusing on the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in work under the supervision of more highly trained staff. These professionals would work directly with children (for example, in long day care, playgroups) and in some family programs. For example, they might assist with family support groups etc. but would not undertake roles requiring sole and complex responsibility (for example, they would not undertake home visits with families identified as at risk). These graduates would be offered advanced standing into a three-year degree program I am suggesting the title Bachelor of Early Childhood and Family Pedagogy. The three-year degree would focus on the common core of child/family/community work. Graduates would have sufficient skills and knowledge to offer direct services (to be in charge of a group in child care, undertake home visits, run support groups etc.) and to manage programs (for example, child care coordinator, a home-visiting program supervisor). In the fourth year of their degree, students would choose a specialisation. Students may specialise in early childhood education, which would enable them to be responsible for programs transitioning children into school, and for the early years of schooling (early childhood teachers). Alternatively,

students may specialise in management, which would give them the necessary skills and knowledge to manage more complex services (such as managing an early childhood hub with its multiplicity of reporting responsibilities). They may specialise in family counselling or child protection, which would give them the ability to work with complex family issues and/or issues around abuse and neglect.

In addition to this new framework for pre-service training, we will need to consider how we might best support those already working in the field to upskill. Clearly existing technical and further education (TAFE) graduates can follow the suggested pathway into a three- and four-year degree. Those already with degrees will need to have a range of graduate training programs available to them. There is considerable value, for example, in offering a graduate program in the material offered in the common core of the three-year undergraduate degree. This would enable existing graduates from a range of other disciplines (for example, nursing, counselling, addiction studies, Indigenous studies) to come to share the underlying philosophy, skills and knowledge required in child/family/community work. Other graduate programs may parallel the specialisations offered in the fourth year of the undergraduate degree, enabling graduates to become multiskilled.

Conclusion

I believe that we need to make significant changes to the way we currently prepare professionals to work in the new world of early childhood/family services if we want to achieve the degree of improvements in outcomes the literature promises may be possible. We cannot simply add more to existing courses; my experiences indicate that existing courses are already over-full and the addition of more material only detracts from the learning possible encouraging, in my opinion, surface rather than in-depth learning. If we are going to adequately prepare professionals for the future, we need to dramatically change our courses. We have to change the way we think about our field and the workers who will succeed there in the future. It is an exciting challenge and I look forward to a vigorous debate as we move together into the world of tomorrow.

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