

Embracing Change –Enhancing professional recognition of early childhood educators

For the first time in decades early childhood education in Australia is really being valued. The new labour government under Prime Minister Rudd has firmly placed early childhood education and care at the top of our nation's agenda. With increased attention through COAG and the National Reform Agenda, policy and public debate is now strongly focussing on early childhood education across Australia.

In Victoria in 2007, Victorian Government directions created The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – linking education to child development across a 0-18 years spectrum. This focus acknowledges what we in early childhood education have been aware of for years – that education is a process that requires lifelong learning. Both the State and federal governments are now responding to the need to build workforce capability in the early childhood sector and enhance quality outcomes for children through recommending increased qualification levels for professionals working within the sector to improve educational outcomes for children.

Early Childhood professionals have for many years been grappling with a sense of their own identity. Professionally many have seen themselves as 'poor cousins' to teachers in other sectors, or being seen as babysitters rather than specialist educators of young children. Low pay and poor working conditions in comparison to teachers in other sectors support the notion that early childhood teachers are less respected and skilled than our peers in other education settings. Early childhood teachers seek professional standing in the community and want to be recognised as having value. With the low status and low pay of the early childhood profession it is difficult to stand up as equals in the education field, but this is slowly changing.

The current debates on the importance of the early childhood years and the value of investing in our children has provided an impetus for examining the professional identity of our sector. Increasingly, those working in early childhood programs are finding the need to reflect on how they see themselves as professionals, and to explore a culture that embraces professional learning as an opportunity to improve our professional standing and increase quality outcomes for children.

The challenge facing our profession now is to advocate and stand by our philosophy of learning and curriculum in the face of perceived pressure and criticism, and to re-visit the philosophy of early childhood education in the context of a seamless view of education as embraced within the new education department directions. In January 2008 the Prime Minister and the federal Minister for education announced a proposal to establish a National Curriculum Board that will oversee the development of a "world class curriculum for all

students from kindergarten to year 12”¹. If the philosophy and values that we believe underpin early childhood education are to be recognised as fundamental to the development of any national curriculum, early childhood educators have to stand up and be counted alongside educators from across the broader education spectrum.

Early childhood teachers are being challenged to raise the profile of our profession. We need to reflect on the role we have in maintaining, enhancing and improving the quality of what it is we do. Are we educators or carers? It could be argued that we are both – but how do we ensure that the education of infants and young children is identified by those outside our profession as being important in the development and education of children, which occurs within the caring and nurturing environments we provide for children. There is increasing acknowledgment of the role of early childhood education in increasing human capital. Children who have quality early education will start on a better life trajectory which will support them in gaining higher qualifications and skills in later life which will support a productive economy².

Education is life long – it doesn’t start with formal schooling or a formal preschool program - it is inherent in our daily existence. We construct knowledge from everything we experience through exploration, practice, problem solving. The construction of knowledge does not start or end at a particular point in one’s life. As early childhood teachers we know this. It is fundamental to the philosophy of our practice and pedagogy. The value of lifelong learning for ourselves through on-going learning and upgrading of skills, knowledge and qualifications should be embraced by early childhood teachers as an opportunity to reflect on the value of early childhood years, to inform our practice and to continue to grow and develop our professional skills, and commit to our pedagogical philosophy.

We exit University or TAFE with a very basic level of skills and knowledge that barely equips us for the role we are about to embark upon. I often equate this with successfully passing a driving test – we have enough skills and knowledge to pass the licence testing, but it is the practice and further refining of these skills and developed maturity that will make us a competent driver, and this will only occur over time through practice and learning from our mistakes. This analogy is true for teachers and educators. We graduate with a broad understanding of child development, teaching methodology and education frameworks that we use as a basis to begin our professional practice – but it is only through the doing, the learning and the opportunities to reflect that come with experience that we really start to feel successful in our practice. One question we should be asking ourselves is what has our qualification really

¹ Joint Media Release with the Deputy Prime Minister, First Steps towards a National Curriculum Office of the Prime Minister
30 January 2008

viewed on line: http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Release/2008/media_release_0050.cfm 15 May 2008

² Heckman, J.J. (2006a) *The Economics of Investing in Early childhood*. Presentation given at the Niftey Conference, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2 February 2006 viewed online at: http://www.niftey.cyh.com/Documents/PDF/invest-UNSW_all_2006-02-01_12pm_mms.pdf 15 May 2008

equipped us to for? Has it just given us the necessary credentials to seek employment or have we really used the process to gain knowledge, critically reflect on our philosophy and practice and identify the learning journey we need to further embark upon. It is important to examine and reflect on learning and the process of learning, and how we can use learning as a means of enhancing our professional practice.

Professional learning as an opportunity to enhance professional practice can be both formal and informal. Both Prime Minister Rudd and Premier Brumby have presented policy directions for formal preschool programs to ideally be delivered by teachers with four year tertiary qualifications. For many working in the sector this will mean having to undertake further formal tertiary education to upgrade our formal qualifications to meet this expectation. Will this need for upgrading of qualifications been seen again as just an opportunity to meet registration standards, or will it be viewed as an opportunity for reflection, research, acquiring deeper level of understanding of children and families and an opportunity to build our personal professional capability. If it is only the former, then the process of gaining the qualification will not result in the construction of new knowledge and professional understanding but be seen as a burden and will do nothing to enhance practice or support quality outcomes for children as a result of this increased level of qualification.

Professional capability is developed not only through the formal learning acquired through gaining qualifications and participating in organised structured professional development programs such as seminars or conferences, but also through more informal mechanisms that are often more sustaining. The term 'informal learning' recognises the "social significance of learning from other people and draws attention to the learning that takes place in the spaces surrounding activities and events peripheral to the formal learning events, and takes place in a much wider variety of settings"³. Informal learning occurs as a result of our experiences, our interactions, our reflections and discussions around our professional practice. As early childhood educators we already know this. Informal and experiential learning underpins our pedagogy and practice. In a paradigm of informal learning the learning occurs intrinsically. It does not rely on leaders or trainers to design or dictate the learning process, but rather often occurs within a framework of legitimate peripheral participation and situatedness as described by Lave and Wenger⁴ where we learn and develop our expertise through active participation, observation of others and coaching and mentoring by more experienced peers. Within our professional practice we have many opportunities to engage in these informal learning processes. Much of our

³ Eraut, M (2004) Informal learning in the workplace in *Studies in Continuing Education*, Volume 26, Issue 2, 2004 , pages 247 - 273

⁴ Lave, J. & Wenger, E (1991) *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation* Cambridge University Press, UK

learning at work occurs through doing things and being practiced in seeking learning opportunities⁵

In order to benefit from the informal learning opportunities we first must acknowledge the need to, and have the desire to, learn. Engaging in dialogue and discussion with professional colleagues, sharing ideas and practice, shadowing and mentoring with more experienced colleagues and peers and participating in both formal and informal networks and professional communities are all opportunities for engaging in informal learning structures that will support our practice. These opportunities will often be found through the coming together of teachers who share common passions and values but also have common interests and issues that can be worked through within a collaborative and collegiate context. Wenger and others have described this informal learning context in terms of them being communities of practice. A community of practice is when

“groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis. ... These people don't necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight and advice. ... They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards.... They accumulate knowledge; they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together.”⁶

In a community of practice members of the community are drawn together by mutual issues and needs and it is the participants that determine the reason for coming together. The members of the community engage collaboratively within a social context. The participants share resources, knowledge and ideas within an environment of mutual respect and trust⁷. This framework of communities of practice is used by early childhood teachers who, because of the isolated nature of our profession, will seek out informal relationships with peers and colleagues using these informal learning opportunities. This may be through communal lunches, Friday night drinks, or through on-line discussions using email or instant messaging. Twenty-five years after a small group of isolated kindergarten teachers in Melbourne's inner West began to meet together over a shared lunch at the local pub, and shared picnics in the school holidays, (where many a dyed dolly peg or new set of visual aids were passed around over a bottle or two of wine), members of the group still meet together and now share not only professional practice but tips on parenting adolescents! Communities of practice are usually not formally established but evolve out of relationships formed external to the formal professional networks and teams often established by management and organisational structures.

⁵ Eraut, M, Steadman, S., Furner, J., Maillardet, F. & Blackman, A (2004) Learning in the professional workplace: relationships between learning factors and contextual factors Division 1 Paper Session, Monday 12th April AERA 2004 Conference, San Diego viewed on line: [http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/227/01/Blackman%2C_C_-_San_Diego_Conference_\(2004\).pdf](http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/227/01/Blackman%2C_C_-_San_Diego_Conference_(2004).pdf) 17 May 2008

⁶ Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice* Harvard Business School Press Mass. pp 4-5

⁷ Rouse, E (2008) So what is the practice of learning in a community (unpublished paper)

Through seeking out professional colleagues and peers and coming together within this informal learning framework, teachers will debate, discuss, and share knowledge and information which will lead to developing a greater confidence in their own philosophy and pedagogy.

To maintain and advance the professional standing of early childhood teachers, we need to embrace the opportunities we have to enhance our knowledge, skills and qualification levels through engaging in both formal ongoing education and training, participating in formal and structured professional development through attending conferences and seminars, and also using these conferences and as forums to share our practice, our research and knowledge. By forming informal professional relationship with our peers within a framework of communities of practice and shared learning, we can increase our own confidence in standing by our philosophy and pedagogical approaches when challenged by policy makers and the wider education sector. We can take the lead in the shaping of early childhood education within the broader context of education policy and in the design of curriculum frameworks that support quality learning outcomes for children that can feed into the broader curriculum design for primary and secondary education.

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