The hidden complexity of early childhood educators’ work: The Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work study

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Abstract
A considerable body of research suggests that knowledgeable and skilled educators are key to the quality of early childhood services. However, the skills and knowledge of educators is subject to being underestimated and contested. In response, the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work Study has been designed to bring to light the distinctive nature of the work of early childhood educators.
childhood educators and its complexity. The study draws its sample from centre based early childhood services that are rated as high quality by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

Keywords
Early childhood, workforce, time use

The early childhood sector in Australia faces considerable challenges in relation to its capacity to recruit and maintain an appropriately qualified early childhood workforce. Documented reasons for educator shortages include poor pay and conditions relative to responsibility, and low professional status (Cumming and Wong, 2012; Gibson, 2013; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2014; Standing Council, 2012). However, attrition from early childhood vocational and pre-service education courses, attrition from the workforce by new workforce entrants (Bretherton, 2010; Wynes et al., 2013), and the erosion of the specialist nature of early childhood education through policies associated with schoolarisation suggest that whilst factors related to pay and conditions are important contributors to this ongoing shortage, there is a more complicated story – a story that is bound up with the hidden nature of the work undertaken by early childhood educators.

This obfuscation arises from a number of popular misconceptions: first, that work with young children is, for its predominantly female workforce, instinctual and requires only a ‘caring’ disposition; second, that because play occurs naturally for children, the play-based curriculum common to most early childhood education and care requires only supervision; and, finally, that learning is teacher-directed instruction. Unfortunately, such misconceptions obscure the skills and knowledge required for early childhood education. Sadly, the discursive deskilling of the early childhood profession recurs with monotonous regularity, often at times of policy review or when there is pressure to reduce the cost of provision.

Notwithstanding, a considerable body of research does establish that skilled and knowledgeable early childhood educators are fundamental to an early childhood education and care system that works well for children, their families and many of the outcomes sought through government policy – see, for example, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education study in the UK (Sylva et al., 2010), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development studies from the USA (The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005) and the E4Kids study in Australia (Tayler, 2016). Yet, even when it appears that this question is ‘settled’, another layer of contestation arises in the question of what it means to be a skilled and knowledgeable early childhood educator. For example, in many jurisdictions, with the push for teacher accreditation/registration, many of us involved in early childhood teacher preparation have noted that such courses have become more heavily weighted towards the primary curriculum. Arguably, such developments colonise early childhood education as a distinct body of knowledge.

In response, the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work study has been designed to bring to light the distinctive nature of the work of early childhood educators and its complexity.¹ In order to identify the practices, knowledge and skills associated with the provision of good-quality early childhood education and care, the study draws its sample from centre-based early childhood services that are rated as high quality by the Australian...
The educators who have been participating in our study work in centres that have an overall rating of exceeding and an exceeding rating in all quality areas and rateable standards.

The theory of practice architectures (TPA) provides the theoretical framework for the research (Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008). TPA enables us to consider the ways in which educators’ work practices both shape and are shaped by interactions which have individual, environmental, relational and organisational dimensions. While TPA provides a framework through which we can examine the environmental conditions that affect educators’ practices, it also recognises the individual agency of educators, their capacity to problem solve and make wise moral decisions, and the influence they exercise. Through TPA, educators’ work can be understood through modes of action (‘doings’), forms of understanding (‘sayings’), and ways of relating to others and the world (‘relatings’).

We are gathering data on educators’ work in three phases, each using a different methodology. In Phase 1, we have gathered empirical evidence on the daily work of educators who work in high-quality services, using a specially designed random-time-sampling smartphone app. In Phase 2, we have conducted focus groups with educators in high-quality settings, with each focus group organised according to qualification/position level. Focus groups are used to test our findings from the time-sampling data and to gather educators’ perspectives on the nature of their work and what they see as factors that contribute to the quality of their work within the centre. In Phase 3 (in train), intensive case studies will capture the depth and breadth of educators’ work, and the professional knowledge and networks that inform their work.

To date, we have completed the first two stages of the study – the time-use study and the focus groups. Through the time-use smartphone app, we have gathered information from over 300 exemplary educators across Australia, resulting in the collection of close to 4000 work hours of data. Our first-glance analysis of the time-use data shows that, unsurprisingly, educators spend most of their time with children. However, their hours are typified by high levels of task-switching and multitasking. Nevertheless, educators express a high degree of satisfaction with their work, and we speculate that this level of satisfaction may be related to the quality of the setting. We are continuing to dig more deeply into the time-use data, with the support of time-use expert Professor Michael Bittman. We have conducted 46 focus groups, involving a total of 111 educators in regional and metropolitan areas throughout Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. The focus-group transcript data is currently being analysed using thematic analysis, as well as by using inductive and deductive analysis with TPA as a heuristic frame.

In designing the study, we originally envisaged that its three phases would broadly align with the TPA dimensions of ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’ – time use would capture educators’ ‘doings’; focus groups would capture ‘sayings’; and case studies would capture ‘relatings’. Unsurprisingly, this delineation has not been so neat. For example, the focus groups have provided important insights into the relationships that support educators in their pedagogy and decision-making – whether this is the strong teamwork evident in these high-quality settings or the external professional networks that educators are a part of. We are excited by the richness of the data gathered thus far and the insights it will yield.

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Notes

1. For further information, our blog can be found at: https://exemplaryeducators.wordpress.com/

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Author biography

Frances Press is Head of the School of Childhood Youth and Education Studies and Professor of Early Childhood and Education Policy at Manchester Metropolitan University. Frances is interested in the ways in which early childhood education and care policy and programs can support socially just experiences and outcomes for children and families. Frances’ work has been used to inform policy and support practice in a wide range of early childhood education contexts. Frances has worked closely with early childhood education and care providers, unions, and NGOs in Australia, as well as researchers internationally.