Imbalances between workforce policy and employment for early childhood graduate teachers: Complexities and considerations

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Abstract
Early childhood teachers have a myriad of possible employment options, with birth to eight years degree qualifications preparing graduates to work in a range of early childhood settings, including prior-to-school. At the same time, early childhood workforce policies in Australia, and elsewhere, are increasingly requiring degree-qualified teachers to be employed in prior-to-school settings. A growing number of reports and studies make a compelling case that there is a shortage of early childhood, degree-qualified teachers who are willing to work in prior-to-school settings, including centre-based child care. This conceptual article focuses on the imbalances in workforce policy and employment for early childhood teacher graduates. We examine the complexities and considerations

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of these imbalances, through exploration of literature and existing research, including small-scale studies and existing graduate destination data (Australian Graduate Survey). The article concludes with a proposed research agenda and suggestions to redress the imbalance of early childhood graduate teachers who are prepared, though seemingly not willing, to operationalise policy requirements for teachers to work in centre-based child care.

Keywords
Early childhood education and care, graduate, survey, employment, child care, kindergarten, preschool, primary

Introduction
Across the world there is increasing attention being directed towards the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC), with a raft of priorities and policies related to the workforce including expenditure, provisioning, quality and educator qualifications (Early Education Directorate, 2017; Organisation for Economic Development (OECD), 2012, 2017; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Internationally, there is an increasing policy focus on ECEC workforce qualifications in the UK (Melhuish, 2016; Moss, 2016; Osgood, 2012), United States (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2016), New Zealand (Carr & Mitchell, 2010) and Australia (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2019; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009a). Despite the debate about the extent to which provision of high-quality early childhood programmes can be attributed to degree-qualifications (Early et al., 2007; Manning, Garvis, Fleming & Wong, 2017; Moss, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2014), an early childhood teaching degree is a requirement of accredited centre-based early childhood programmes in Australia and in other parts of the world (DEEWR, 2009a; ACECQA, 2019).

There is a growing body of evidence (Gibson, 2013, 2015; Watson, 2006; Zollo, 2017) that suggests very few early childhood graduate teachers want to work in prior-to-school settings, which we argue leads to an imbalance between ECEC workforce policy and employment. In Australia, early childhood teacher preparation includes a four-year degree qualification or a two-year post graduate degree qualification, with the majority of accredited courses focusing on the OECD acknowledged early childhood period (2017) of birth to eight years (Fenech & Hadley, 2018). For most early childhood teacher graduates, career pathways can include teaching in prior-to-school and school-based settings. Prior-to-school settings include centre-based early childhood education and care (also known as centre-based child care) for children from birth to five years and kindergarten/preschool for children aged three to five years. In formal school-based settings, teachers with early childhood degree qualifications often, though not always, work in the first years of primary school with children aged five to eight years. Each setting has different working conditions, with teachers in centre-based child care generally working longer hours with more contact time with children, receiving lower pay (approximately AUD$20,000 less per annum) and receiving less leave provision (approximately six weeks less annual leave) than kindergarten/preschool and primary school colleagues (Bretherton, 2010; Department of Education and Training [DET], 2014).

This conceptual article examines the imbalances between ECEC workforce policy and employment for early childhood graduate teachers in Australia by framing the discussion
around complexities and considerations. First, we look to the broader context in Australia to explore complexities in ECEC programme provision and policies. We draw on existing research to provide deeper insights and illuminations into employment opportunities and destinations for early childhood teachers. Second, we discuss considerations that shape early childhood graduate teachers’ employment in primary schools, seemingly in preference to other employment destination options. Finally, the article concludes by summarising the imbalances between policy and early childhood graduate teacher employment and proposing a research agenda to redress this imbalance.

Complexities in ECEC programme provision and policies in Australia

Complexity in early childhood programme provision and policy agendas is a consistent theme in the international and Australian literature (Bown, Sumson, & Press, 2009; Brennan, 2007; Melhuish, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Penn, 2011; Press, 2009; Tayler, 2011). In particular, complexity around programme provision, which is identified as either care or education, has clear implications for workforce policy and employment. In Australia, provision for young children has been constructed as care while provision for near-school age children and school-aged children in primary schools has been constructed as education (OECD, 2006, 2012, 2017). Complexities surrounding the care and education divide have set the scene for divergent work conditions, which has led to fewer early childhood teachers wanting to work in prior-to-school settings.

Several ECEC workforce policy initiatives over the last decade have influenced the Australian ECEC workforce landscape. Investing in the Early Years: A National Early Childhood Development Strategy (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) established a goal of universal access for all children to a university-qualified early childhood teacher for 15 hours a week in the year prior to school. Additionally, it aimed to ‘improve recruitment and retention of the ECEC workforce; develop pathways that reward and support the best workers; and raise the level of qualifications’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p.1). Further policy reform introduced the National Quality Standard for ECEC (2009 for 2012 implementation) which included the National Quality Framework (NQF). The early years workforce strategy – The early childhood education and care workforce strategy for Australia (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, 2012) – included a key priority area on building ‘a qualified workforce’, where ‘increased numbers of educators have qualifications to support the reforms, including the NQF and Universal Access’ (p. 12). Alongside the National ECEC workforce policy have been jurisdiction specific initiatives and strategies. Examples include the Queensland Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan 2016-2019 (DET, 2016); NSW Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2018 – 2022 (Department of Education (DoE), 2018); the Tasmanian Early Years and School Age Care Sectors Workforce Plan (DoE, 2017). Each of these ECEC workforce documents, as indicative state/territory-based examples, includes a focus on qualifications, including a four-year early childhood teaching degree to meet the National ECEC workforce policy requirements.

While these ECEC workforce policies and initiatives require an increased presence of degree-qualified early childhood teachers in prior-to-school settings in Australia, little is known about the extent to which this is being realised in terms of graduate destinations across the ECEC sector. In order to examine the complexities around imbalances between policy requirements and early childhood teacher employment we turn to existing research, providing deeper insights and illuminations into the Australian context.
Complexities in employment for early childhood graduate teachers in Australia

A small, though nonetheless compelling, body of Australian evidence includes small-scale empirical studies and data from the Graduate Destinations Survey (GDS) for one university. Together, this research suggests that while early childhood teachers are qualified to work in a range of possible education and care settings, soon after graduation the majority are employed in primary schools, with the remainder, who are employed in prior-to-school settings, having career aspirations to seek work in primary school.

Examples of small-scale Australian research. Examples of small-scale research come from two research projects undertaken by Gibson (2013, 2015) and Zollo (2017). In Gibson’s (2013, 2015) research, 19 pre-service teachers participated in focus groups to examine work in child care. Overwhelmingly, the participants acknowledged the importance of work in the early years, and in prior-to-school settings, though conveyed strongly their reluctance to seek employment in centre-based child care, identifying as the main deterrent for not seeking employment in prior-to-school settings the perceived undervaluing of work in centre-based child care. At the same time their career aspirations were to work in primary school.

Zollo (2017) also examined pre-service teachers’ constructions of teaching young children in prior-to-school settings. Survey data generated by 63 third year preservice early childhood teachers and in-depth focus groups with 8 of these same preservice teachers highlighted tensions between preparing early childhood teachers to work with very young children from birth to three years and the construction of ‘proper’ teachers and teaching. The quantitative and qualitative data indicated that these pre-service early childhood teachers articulated that very young children were competent learners and had the right to qualified teachers, yet simultaneously constructed their own experience of teaching very young children as ‘a waste of time’ akin to babysitting. The data highlighted that preservice teachers had pre-conceived negative views of completing a professional experience placement with this age group and did not think it was necessary to their teacher qualification. The data also brought to light that teaching very young children in prior-to-school settings after graduation was a career option that very few of the preservice teachers would consider, or at least not as a first preference.

Graduate destinations data: An Australian example. Alongside these small-scale qualitative studies, there is Australia-wide data about ECEC graduate destinations. The Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) was a national census of tertiary graduates conducted annually from 1972 to 2015. (This survey is now the Graduate Outcomes Survey, conducted from 2016 onwards). Distributed to all graduates from Australian universities approximately four months after graduation, the response rates for the AGS typically ranged from 60 to 65% (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). The AGS collected information regarding graduates’ employment and salary outcomes, continuing study and labour market status, job search behaviour, previous education history, and other key respondent characteristics. The survey was reported as being for the year after graduation, so the 2015 survey was completed by 2014 graduates.

We report here on one large metropolitan Australian university (from 2001 to 2015 inclusive), which had graduated the fourth highest number of qualified teachers of any institution in Australia from early childhood education courses between 2001 and 2015 (Universities Australia, 2016; identified as Field of Education: Early Childhood by AGS respondents) representation of relatively large cohorts of recent early childhood graduate teachers. Analysis presented here focussed on the questions ‘Name of your employer’ (open-ended response), ‘industry’
Graduates were asked about their main source of employment regardless of whether the employment was casual, part-time, or full-time. The aim was to code each graduate’s employment destination in relation to the overarching employment setting (child care, kindergarten, primary school, etc.). The classification of data into the final employment setting categories emerged as the analysis was undertaken and was informed by the literature discussed above.

Data analysis was guided by the research question, Where do early childhood graduate teachers work? While traditional early childhood employment settings in Australia include family day care, centre-based child care, kindergarten and the early years of primary school, the AGS data revealed the following categories: education administration (e.g. quality officer or policy officer); kindergarten (stand-alone programme in the year prior to school); centre-based child care; private childcare (i.e. nanny); prior-to-school setting not otherwise specified; outside school hours care; tertiary education; secondary education; primary education; special education; education setting not otherwise specified; and not in education.

In the coding process, industry and name of employer were given primacy over the occupation name. That is, if the employer name and/or industry specified child care, but the identified occupation was kindergarten teacher, the response was coded to child care, rather than kindergarten. Similarly, when graduates responded that they were working for the state education authority (that directly employs primary and secondary teachers) as a teacher or as preparatory teachers, they were coded as working in primary school.

The two ‘not otherwise specified’ categories were used to code responses that did not provide enough information to assign the graduate to any other category. The limitation of this approach is that without specific information regarding employment settings, some data may have been mis-coded.

Analysis of data from the GDS for nine cohorts with a combined total of 554 graduates from the Queensland University of Technology Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) course with a focus on birth to eight years of age (survey data from 2007 to 2015, for graduates from 2006 to 2014) showed that despite having a qualification in early childhood, almost half (47.9%) of graduates began their career working in primary (elementary) school. Less than a third of graduates (31.9%) were working in any prior-to-school setting at the time of the survey. However, the findings are limited in that it is unknown to what extent this graduate data is representative of all early childhood graduates nationally.

The data presented represents approximately 59% of all Queensland University of Technology early childhood graduate teachers between 2006 to 2014. Graduates ranged in age from 20 to 59 years with a mean age of 27.28 and were 97% female. Using iterating consultative analysis, the researchers moved the data inductively from individual job titles to the categories shown in Figure 1. Full details of the survey items and analysis approach are available from the authors.

While the AGS data captures where early childhood graduate teachers are employed immediately after graduation, it does not provide insights into whether this employment aligns with their career aspirations. Further, and significantly, based on the emerging research narrative around early childhood graduate teachers’ aversion to work in centre-based child care (Gibson, 2013), it does not capture whether graduates remain in that initial setting or in the profession at all. Still, from the limited research available, it seems that there is a considerable imbalance between ECEC workforce policy and early childhood graduate teachers’ initial career choices.

Considerations with respect to early childhood graduate teachers’ employment

We now review the current Australian early childhood education programmes and ECEC
Figure 1. Graduate destinations for early childhood graduates from Queensland University of Technology. Employment setting of [Removed for blind review] early childhood graduates 2007–2015. NOS = not otherwise specified; OSHC = outside-school-hours care.
workforce policies to consider early childhood graduate teachers’ employment and career aspirations to work in primary schools, seemingly in preference to other employment destination options. Here, we tease out the workforce policy–graduate destinations imbalances through consideration of early childhood qualifications and early childhood education programmes, teacher registration, position titles and workforce pay and conditions.

Early childhood qualifications and early childhood degree-programmes. In this section, we discuss the role that qualifications and early childhood degree-programmes might play in graduates’ reluctance to seek employment in prior-to-school and centre-based child care settings. Australian education policies related to qualification requirements (DEEWR, 2009a; Manning et al., 2017) may impact early childhood teachers’ graduate employment destinations. The Australian policy agendas of the NQF and the universal access strategy have introduced consistent qualification requirements across all jurisdictions for the first time in Australia’s history (DEEWR, 2012). This includes the requirement to have four-year degree-qualified early childhood teachers in prior-to-school settings, including centre-based child care, potentially opening up increased employment opportunities.

Early childhood educator programmes (courses) in Australia support a two-tier qualification system, with programmes categorised into two main types (Productivity Commission, 2011). First, bachelor’s degree programmes in early childhood teaching are three or four years in duration and are generally offered through universities (Watson & Axford, 2008). Second, other qualifications, including advanced diploma, diploma and certificate programmes, are offered through vocational education and training programmes, either through technical and further education institutions or registered training organisations (Productivity Commission, 2011). Early childhood teacher education programmes must comply with the requirements of the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), which prescribe various elements of the programme, including particular subjects of study and the number of days of professional experience in different settings. For early childhood graduate teachers, their bachelor’s degree provides them with knowledge and experience with children across the birth to eight years age range. These points present further considerations that potentially shape graduates’ employment and career aspirations to work in primary school, and not in prior-to-school centre-based child care settings.

Teacher registration. Partially in response to the fragmented approach to teacher registration, in 2018 AITSL the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2018) undertook an Australian national review of teacher registration. In taking account of different approaches to registration in states and territories, the 17 recommendations focused on improving and reinforcing teacher quality, strengthening children’s safety and streamlining teacher registration processes. Two recommendations were specific for early childhood teachers: ‘all early childhood teachers in Australia, regardless of their employment setting, be required to be registered by a teacher regulatory authority under a consistent national approach’ (AITSL, 2018, p. 28); and, national teacher standards should be ‘amended to ensure their relevance and applicability to early childhood teachers’ (p. 29). The recommendations from the final report are yet to be implemented, including ongoing variations in teacher registration provision for early childhood graduate teachers working in prior-to-school settings, with most not having access to the same registration entitlements as teachers employed in primary school settings.

The successful completion of a four-year early childhood teacher degree does not automatically entitle graduates to full teacher registration. This varies across jurisdictions – in Queensland, for example, where there is a prominence of birth to eight years degree courses, teacher registration is
only granted to those early childhood teacher graduates who work with kindergarten-aged children or older and an approved Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) curriculum. The national early years curriculum, Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009b), is not a QCAA-approved curriculum. In other jurisdictions in Australia, for example in New South Wales and Victoria, the early childhood teacher education course landscape sees a prominence of birth to five years or birth to twelve years degree courses, and the teacher registration eligibility differs. In Victoria, for example, the teacher registration authority, Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT), requires all degree qualified teachers (including those who are early childhood degree-qualified) to be registered (VIT, 2019). The VIT Effective Mentoring Programme supports all teachers to transition from provisional to full registration (AITSL, 2018, p. 11). However, these indicative example variations across jurisdictions further illustrate the complexity that faces early childhood teacher graduates upon entering a profession, which undoubtedly play a role in influencing graduates’ decisions to seek employment in primary school settings. Varied qualifications and registration can lead to differing graduate employment outcomes, often illustrated through position titles. 

**Position titles.** In the early childhood setting, the title given to a position can denote the level of qualifications (Adams, 2008) and suggest leadership and rank (Rodd, 2013). The issue of position titles and how people in the workplace are named is not simply a matter of semantics. There is power and status that comes with titles. Historically, position titles in early childhood have varied depending on the setting and guidelines of different states and territories. Early childhood teachers have variously been referred to as ‘directors’, ‘authorised supervisors’, ‘group leaders’ and ‘teachers’ (Adams, 2008). Specific requirements for qualifications to work in specific positions were previously included in local jurisdiction legislation and regulations but recent Commonwealth legislation, Education and care services national regulations (Ministerial Council for Education, 2011), now governs qualification requirements and assigns new position titles, as captured in the NQF (DEEWR, 2012). Table 1 outlines some of the required changes, with a focus on position titles and work in centre-based child care. The state of Queensland illustrates the alignment between position title and qualification.

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the position title and qualification requirements to work as a teacher in kindergarten (Table 2) and primary school (Table 3). These tables illustrate the

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**Table 1. Legislation, Position Titles and Required Qualifications for Before-School Settings, Including Child Care, in Queensland.**

| Legislation | Position title | Minimum qualification required and duration |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Child Care Act 2002 and Child Care Regulation 2003 (Queensland Government, 2003) | Director | Advanced diploma (2 years) |
| | Group Leader | Diploma (2 years) |
| | Assistant | Certificate III (1 year) |
| Education and Care Services National Law 2011 (Queensland Government, 2011) | Early Childhood Teacher | Bachelor degree (4 years) |
| | Nominated Supervisor | Certificate III (1 year) |
| | Educational Leader | Certificate III (1 year) |
| | Educator | Certificate III (1 year) |
| Universal Access strategy (DEEWR, 2009) | Early Childhood Teacher | Bachelor degree (4 years) |
changes, shifts and related complexities that position titles construct within early childhood education.

A unique feature of the early childhood workforce is that an educator’s position and associated title is assigned primarily based on the length of their qualification (see Table 1). For graduate early childhood teachers, if they work in centre-based child care, they will be working alongside a number of educators with other position titles, with most of their colleagues holding a different qualification, of lesser length and arguably lesser status (Gibson, 2013). Note-worthy is that an early childhood graduate teacher may be employed as a teacher in centre-based child care and hold a higher/longer qualification than their direct supervisor, the director/manager, who is only required to hold a two-year advanced diploma. This complex and diverse working environment in centre-based child care contrasts with school-based and kindergarten programmes which consistently require teacher qualifications, while only in some instances (where there are 25 or more children) are teacher qualifications required in centre-based child care settings (ACECQA, 2013). In Australia, delineation of role descriptions across kindergarten as education (with higher status) and child care as care (with lower status) yet again invokes a complexity which can influence ECEC teachers’ avoidance of prior-to-school settings.

Workplace pay and conditions. Another influence on graduate teachers’ desire to work in primary school settings relates to complex workplace pay and conditions across the care and education divide. The different industrial awards for early childhood settings lead to significant differences in pay and conditions with ‘early childhood educators working closest to the school gate [being] better trained and rewarded’ (OECD, 2006, p. 158). The recent national Australian ECEC workforce study (Irvine et al., 2016) reported that ‘early years educators continue to be some of the lowest paid workers in Australia’ (p. 7). A four-year degree-qualified early childhood teacher in a primary school on the first salary level will earn up to AUD$10,000 more per year (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2012c) than an early childhood teacher on the first salary level in centre-based child care (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2012a), with kindergarten teacher salary comparable to centre-based child care rates (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2012b). The salary differentiation widens over years of experience, with a more substantial earning capacity in primary schools. An early childhood teacher with some years of experience may, upon promotion, be appointed as a primary school head of curriculum. In this role, a teacher in a primary school would earn approximately AUD$34,000 per year more than an early childhood teacher employed as the director in centre-based child care with the

| Table 2. Legislation, Position Titles and Required Qualifications for Kindergarten in Queensland. |
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| Legislation | Position title | Minimum qualification required |
| Professional standards for Queensland teachers (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006) | Teacher | Bachelor degree (4 years) |
| Universal Access strategy (DEEWR, 2009) | Early Childhood Teacher | Bachelor degree (4 years) |

| Table 3. Legislation, Position Titles and Required Qualifications for Primary School in Queensland. |
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| Legislation | Position title | Minimum qualification required |
| Queensland College of Teachers (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006) | Teacher | Bachelor degree (4 years) |
same years of experience (QIRC, 2012a, 2012c). This is not always the case, as some centres do pay above award, however in the majority of cases this substantial pay variation prevails.

Conditions of employment also vary considerably, with the most notable difference pertaining to annual leave allowances. A teacher in primary school or kindergarten is entitled to approximately 10 weeks per year of school holidays (QIRC, 2012a, 2012c), while a teacher in centre-based child care is entitled to four weeks of annual leave. Hours of work also vary, with staff in centre-based child care potentially required to work shifts between the hours of 6:00 am and 7:00 pm and contact hours for kindergarten or primary school generally being between 9:00 am and 3:00 pm (QIRC, 2012a, 2012c). These differences in pay and conditions across centre-based child care, kindergarten, and school settings clearly have implications for graduate employment choices, making graduates less likely to seek employment in centre-based child care.

Conclusion

The article concludes with a proposed research agenda and suggestions to redress the imbalance of early childhood graduate teachers, who are prepared, though seemingly not willing, to operationalise policy requirements to have teachers work in centre-based child care. This article illuminates the complexities and considerations that exist for early childhood teacher graduates, as they make decisions about employment. A small, though nonetheless illuminating, number of studies make a compelling case that early childhood graduates are averse to working in prior-to-school settings (Bretherton, 2010; Thorpe, Millear and Petriwskyi, 2012; Watson, 2006), and in particular centre-based child care (Gibson, 2013, 2015; Zollo, 2017), and see the teaching qualification as a ‘pathway out of childcare’ (Watson, 2006, p. xv). Whilst existing data in Australia provides a valuable snapshot of graduate employment rates and places of work soon after graduation, what is not known is whether this matches with graduates’ career aspirations (i.e. where they would like to work). It would be useful to know more about where they work in the short, medium, and longer term, and why they work in these settings. Future research could also seek to understand why students enrol in early childhood degrees, their career aspirations, and how these are shaped and changed across time. Research that provides fuller, national portraits of early childhood teacher graduates’ employment would enable deeper understanding of the complexities and considerations around career choices and provide important insights into policy imbalances.

Early childhood graduate teachers’ employment decisions are shaped with respect to several considerations. Alongside early childhood qualifications, early childhood degree-programmes, teacher registration, position titles, and workforce pay and conditions, it is likely that other factors may influence graduates’ employment career aspirations – media, peers, supervising teachers, friends and family. Research to better understand the ways in which graduates’ decisions are shaped will contribute to more informed approaches to early childhood workforce development and teacher education.

We suggest that to shift the imbalance between early childhood teacher employment and career aspirations, and ECEC workforce policy such that early childhood graduate teachers are appropriately degree-prepared and willing to seek employment in prior-to-school settings (particularly in centre-based child care), a number of innovative research led and research informed strategies and initiatives are needed, including some of the following suggestions. Attention to early childhood teacher career pathways from the commencement of degree programmes would be worthy of consideration. Scrutiny of degree programme content, including the ways in which centre-based child care is spoken about, positioned and included would be important. Initiatives to turn around the number of early childhood graduate teachers working in primary schools, and
not prior-to-school settings, may include professional experience programmes that target pre-service teachers, providing quality experiences in centre-based child care. Mentoring programmes both within teacher education courses and beyond into the profession would go some way to supporting and guiding early childhood teachers within centre-based child care. SHOWCASING exemplary practice in centre-based child care, and making visible what is possible, would open opportunities for early childhood teachers. The emerging early childhood teacher workforce has a myriad of employment options—their willingness to work in centre-based child care will be essential to operationalise policy imperatives.

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