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The Cost of Quality and Coherence: An Investigation of Early Childhood Teacher Workloads

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Abstract: In Australia, profound changes are occurring in relation to early childhood education. The introduction of a National Quality Reform Agenda by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in July 2010 has developed a National Quality Standard to improve the quality of early childhood education and care in states and territories across the country. Concurrently, Australian education is in the midst of the roll-out of its first national curriculum. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established in December 2008 and charged with the task of improving the coherence and quality of curriculum, assessment and reporting across Australia. The convergence of these two major reform agendas at this point in time have had significant implications for early childhood professionals in Australia. Recently, a pilot study of early childhood teachers employed in the state of Queensland (Kindergarten – Year 3) was conducted. The purpose of the study was to better understand the way in which the national reform agendas in the areas of curriculum are impacting current teaching practices and workloads. This paper presents the findings from this study in light of the literature, and highlights key issues arising from the research.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Teacher Workloads, Australia

Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has acknowledged the profound impact that the early years have on future health, learning, development and wellbeing of young Australians. In addition, COAG recognized that in many cases, the amount of time Australian children are spending in early childhood education care and services to support the needs of parents is continuing to increase, and that quality experiences are critical to the future wellbeing of these children (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). In July 2010 COAG developed a *National Quality Framework (NQF)* following the introduction of the *National Quality Reform Agenda*. According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009) the purpose of the NQF is to develop a higher quality of early childhood education and care in states and territories throughout Australia in the key areas of health, education and wellbeing.

Around the same time that Australian early childhood education and care reform agenda was announced, the first Australian national curriculum has started to roll out in states and territories across the country. In December 2008, an independent authority working in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders representing state and territory was established by the national government. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was charged with the task of improving the coherence and quality of curriculum,

assessment and reporting across Australia. The convergence of the *National Quality Reform Agenda* and the roll-out of the national Australian curriculum reform in such a short amount of time have had significant implications for early childhood professionals working in Australia.

As part of the Council of Australia Governments' Early Childhood Commitment, state and territory governments have committed to working together to provide Australian families with better quality and more accessible and affordable integrated early childhood education and care options. For example, all early childhood services throughout Australia are expected to become familiar with the national *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, or EY-LF as it is known, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) and map their existing practices against the principles outlined within the document. Australian state and territory governments are working quickly to also develop professional resources to support early childhood professionals to enhance learning and development in prior to school settings.

The Early Childhood Teacher Workforce in Australia

Demand for pre-primary school teachers in Queensland has increased due to population growth and the implementation of government early childhood policy. The Australian Government has pledged \$252 million to Queensland over the next five years to enhance access to early childhood education in the year before school, while the State Government has announced a new kindergarten program expected to provide employment opportunities for approximately 850 (full time) additional early childhood teachers in Queensland by 2014 (Queensland Government, 2009). This initiative involves the establishment of 240 new or extra kindergarten services and the gradual implementation of kindergarten programs in other settings including long day care.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2009) suggests that while the education sector is not experiencing difficulties in recruiting pre-primary school teachers, childcare centres are reporting staffing difficulties for recruiting and retaining qualified staff. The situation is made worse by a falling number of graduates from early childhood teacher education. Limited studies in Queensland, Australia have identified current perceptions about working in the early years (Garvis, Flückiger & Twigg, 2010). This study helps fill this void by providing a snapshot of current perceptions of working conditions.

In Queensland, the current award for a pre-primary school teacher (*Early Childhood Education Award—State 2003*) is significantly higher than the award for a childcare worker (*Child Care Industry Award—State 2003*), and is being reviewed as part of the *2000 Queensland Industrial Relations Commission Inquiry* which has had ongoing implications over the past decade in relation to early childhood reform. A number of respondents in the DEEWR (2009) survey believe that the Australian Government's early childhood policy of enhanced access to early childhood education will lead to an increase in vacancies for pre-primary school teachers in child care centres and community kindergartens, and exacerbate recruitment issues. The following section of the paper provides information about the pilot study conducted in 2010 which was designed to provide insight into the implications that the two aforementioned reform agendas have had on early childhood teacher workloads in Queensland (Australia) to date.

Early Childhood Teacher Workloads in Queensland: A Pilot Study

This pilot study examines the way in which current early childhood and education reform agendas in Australia have impacted early childhood teacher workloads in Queensland. The following focus questions guided the investigation: What do we know about the impact of teaching workloads on early childhood teachers? What do we need to know? And, what are the implications for policy and practice?

This study was designed to map current teacher workloads in early childhood education settings. For purposes of this study, early childhood teachers were selected based on employment as a Kindergarten teacher or a Year 1, 2 or 3 teacher in Queensland to align with the requirements for formal teaching of children between the ages of 4 and 8 years suggested by the National Quality Reform Agenda. . Data were collected through a brief questionnaire (electronic) which included 17 questions [demographics, multiple-choice, open-ended]. The questionnaire was distributed to early childhood teachers in state and non-state preschools and schools in Queensland. Online professional networks were also used to promote the study, including Queensland Government's Office for Early Childhood Education and Care (The Office), the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian's *Early Years Strategic Network*, Early Childhood Australia—Queensland and lower primary school online discussion lists.

Individual early childhood teachers who taught Kindergarten, Prep, Year 1, Year 2 or Year 3 were encouraged to complete the questionnaire and return it by email or post. Questionnaires returned by email were immediately downloaded and de-identified. Emails were then deleted to ensure confidentiality. The questionnaire was designed to take less than 15 minutes to complete and respondents were asked to complete the survey off-site and outside of normal working hours.

Participants

Seventy-two early childhood teachers in the state of Queensland (Australia) participated in this study. Participants were located throughout the state of Queensland in rural, urban and metropolitan regions.

Tables 1 and 2 show demographic information for the participants based on gender and age. Of the total number of participants ($N=72$), 97% were female ($N=70$) and 3% were male ($N=2$). Among the participants, 21% ranged from 20–29 years of age ($N=15$), 26% ranged from 30–39 years of age ($N=19$), 31% ranged from 40–49 years of age ($N=22$), and 22% were aged 50 or over ($N=16$).

Tables 3, 4 and 5 show information about participants' qualifications, work status and years of employment as an early childhood educator. Table 3 shows the previous qualifications of participants. Of the range of qualifications identified in the responses, 4% of participants ($N=3$) held non-specified teaching degrees. Of the participants, 15% of participants hold a Diploma ($N=11$) and 57% of participants hold a Bachelor degree ($N=41$). While 6% of participants hold a Graduate Diploma ($N=4$) as their highest level of qualification, 10% of participants ($N=7$) hold a Masters degree. The highest level of qualification was an EdD (Professional Doctorate) held by 1% of participants ($N=1$). A total of 7% ($N=5$) of participants did not respond to this question.

Table 4 shows the work status of the participants. Among participants, 90% were employed full time ($N=65$), 3% were employed part time ($N=2$) and 7% were employed on a contractual basis ($N=5$).

Table 5 shows the number of years participants have been employed as early childhood educators (i.e., teaching in Kindergarten, Prep, Year 1, Year 2 or Year 3). The number varied from one year to more than 20 years. The average number of years teachers had been working in the aforementioned early childhood settings in Queensland was nine years. Among participants, 42% have been employed as early childhood educators for more than 10 years which indicates that more than one-half of the participants in this study were very experienced early childhood teachers. The next largest group of participants employed as early childhood teachers had taught for less than six years (36%), followed by those who had taught for 7-10 years (22%).

The questionnaire consisted of a range of open questions designed to elicit teachers' experiences with the early childhood education and national curriculum reform agendas. Questions were designed to align with the model of 'question-answer behaviour' explored by Foddy (1993), which provides important principles to ensure answers can be interpretable and comparable. From these principles, comes the primary aim of the 'Topic-Applicability-Perspective' or 'TAP' paradigm, which was designed to produce valid, reliable respondent information (Foddy, 1993: 193):

Topic: The topic should be properly defined so that each respondent clearly understands what is being discussed in the question.

Applicability: The applicability of the question to each respondent should be established; respondents should not be asked information that they are unable to provide.

Perspective: The perspective that respondents should adopt, when answering the question, should be specified so that each respondent gives the same kind of answer.

The open questions in the questionnaire provided an in-depth understanding of current work force perceptions. Responses from the teachers provide new understandings of their own experiences and perceptions of current workloads as an early childhood teacher in Queensland. Data from the questionnaire were analysed using content analysis. This process allowed newly identified themes to be compared with previously identified themes to ensure a greater understanding of the themes identified from the investigation (Foddy, 1993).

Research Findings

The following section of the paper discusses the research findings from the questionnaire. The findings are listed under the topics of (i) timetables, (ii) perceptions of current workloads and (iii) future support.

Timetables

Participants indicated the average daily start time as **7:40am** and the average daily finish time as **4:50pm**. On average, students arrived at the school/service at **8:20am** and left the school/service at **3:15pm**. This suggests that participants were onsite for a little over nine

hours a day. In addition to completing the questionnaire, participants were encouraged to submit a copy of their teaching timetable. In general, there was significant variation between teaching timetables, as participants taught in different settings (i.e., child care service, school, etc).

Participants were also asked to indicate how many hours per week they worked (i.e., curriculum planning, marking, resource preparation, parent consultation, etc) outside of their time at the school/service. On average, during weekdays participants worked an additional **2.5 hours** and on weekends they worked an additional **5.45 hours**. Sunday appeared as the most common day for weekend work. In Queensland, registered full-time teachers in primary schools are paid for 25 hours of work a week. In kindergarten, full-time teachers are under a different award (*Early Childhood Education Award – State 2003*) with hours ranging from 32 to 37.5 hours a week. From this sample of 72 early childhood teachers in Queensland, it appears that the hours worked exceeds the weekly paid hours of employment. One teacher described her personal experience:

The hours impact on my own life. This year most teachers I know have lost their balance- it's school work day, night and weekends just to keep afloat. Social lives, art, hobbies, sport have all been lost. We're exhausted beyond belief. I used to teach composite classes- up to 32 children. That was hard. But now I have a straight year one class and it is harder...I didn't have to tell my teenage girls to avoid a teaching career, they've seen what is involved- no way would they become teachers (Participant 3).

Another teacher reflected on colleagues who had given up teaching because of the long hours:

I know two really great teachers that have given up teaching because they feel as though they don't have a life other than school (you are married to it if you want to do a good job!). Some teachers just say enough is enough (Participant 19).

Perceptions of Current Workloads

Participants were asked to state whether their workload *increased* or *decreased* since the beginning of 2010, and to explain their response. Of the 72 participants, 69% ($N=50$) indicated that their workload had *increased* since the beginning of 2010. Reasons were based around recent changes in early childhood curriculum and policy. These included greater accountability surrounding the *National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) testing, extra reporting/documentation regarding the introduction of the *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline*, the inclusion of Year 1 Learning Statements into the curriculum, and the introduction of school audits. The participants wrote that the changes had increased curriculum expectations in the classroom, requiring greater time spent on planning to meet all outcomes. Comments included:

Curriculum planning requirements are changing too rapidly to keep up with and implement effectively (Participant 6).

A total of 10% ($N=7$) participants indicated that their workload had *decreased* since the beginning of 2010. Reasons included moving from full time employment to part time employ-

ment and becoming more familiar with the expectations of what is expected in the curriculum. Participants suggested they had become more familiar with the expectations after a year of change in the classroom.

The remaining 21% of participants ($N=15$) indicated that their workload had *been unchanged* since the beginning of 2010, indicating that the same goals in the service/ school were the same. These participants seemed to suggest that they had previously spent a considerable time preparing for the changes to curriculum and quality assurance requirements for their service/school, and were experiencing a period of consistency.

Overall, most participants (69%) in the study indicated an *increased* workload since the beginning of 2010 and associated the increase with the national and state reform agendas in early childhood education and curriculum underway in Australia. The following section includes suggestions for further support which were identified by early childhood teachers who participated in the study.

Future Support

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked what would best support them in managing their workload. The following list includes suggestions for supporting early childhood teachers with their workloads; (1) increases in allocation of time; (2) changes to class structures; and (3) changes in documentation.

The participants favoured an increase in time allocation for non-contact time and teacher aide time. One participant explained that her teacher aide was only expected to work with children:

I would like aides that had more time and were allowed to make resources. Our aides are expected to work with children only, not be involved in clean up, preparing resources and photocopying. I have to do it all! (Participant 13).

Teachers suggested they would be more supported in their workload if there were changes to the structure within school classes. This included reducing the number of students in a class, moving away from composite classes in the early years (i.e. no multi-grade classes such as Year 1 and 2, or Prep, Year 1 and 2). One teacher made the following comment:

I teach four year levels (multi-grade) and it difficult. This could be reduced (Participant 18).

The final area of suggested support was changes in documentation. Teacher would like a reduction in paperwork. Teachers suggested that the increase in paperwork was used as a justification of their professional conduct in the classroom. These two teachers suggested that expectation of documentation and planning had given little time to consider actual implementation of activities in the classroom:

I think less paperwork should be required to 'prove' that you are doing the 'right thing' (Participant 4).

We need less talk about documentation and more about help on the ground (Participant 8).

In general, study participants articulated a number of suggestions which are designed to assist in decreasing early childhood teacher workloads in Queensland. A discussion of implications of the overall findings from the pilot study follows.

Discussion

Based on participant responses to the questionnaire, this study revealed the impact workload has on for the professional lives of early childhood educators. Participants commented frequently on the high expectations placed on early childhood educators, in particular. In some cases, early childhood teachers have opted for part-time employment in order to maintain a 'work-life balance' given the increased workload for full-time early childhood teachers.

The central purpose of this pilot study was to gain an understanding of the impact that the two major reform agendas in early childhood education and curriculum have had on early childhood teachers in Queensland. Based on the findings of this study and the limited research available on this topic, the following recommendations for further research are made:

1. This study provides data from a sample of 72 early childhood teachers in the state of Queensland. It is recommended that this study is both broadened and replicated in other Australian states and territories in order to obtain baseline data on early childhood teacher workloads.
2. This study was informed by feedback from individual participants about their personal experiences with the current reforms.

While this study was based on a small sample size, it is indicative of the types of studies in the area of early childhood teacher workloads (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008; Noble & Macfarlane, 2005; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000) which have been previously undertaken. Comments by the survey respondents indicate the early childhood teachers' own personal health and wellbeing has an impact on their ability to manage their professional lives, which confirms the findings by Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock (2008). Less experienced early childhood teachers (e.g, teaching less than 6 years) indicated higher confidence in managing the new requirements from the quality reform agenda and new curriculum, not unlike the study of early childhood teacher burnout conducted by Noble & Macfarlane (2005). As evidenced in the survey responses from participants, personal approaches to working as an early childhood teacher also play a role in response to new demands within the profession. This finding aligns with the findings from longitudinal study of postgraduate teachers from Sydney Teacher's College in relation to teacher retention (Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000). Overall, this study has found that there are multiple reasons for increased stress levels for early childhood teachers which relate to previous research in the area of early childhood teacher workloads, teacher stress and teacher retention. It is recommended that this type of study is replicated and expanded into other states and territories within Australia in order to develop a better understanding of the challenges within the profession on a broader scale.

Conclusion

Early childhood education, the implementation of a national curriculum and the new national accreditation processes are important priorities for Australia. It is therefore timely to present the findings of a study which relates to early childhood professional practices. The research findings from this pilot study highlight the impact that the *National Quality Reform Agenda* and the introduction of a national curriculum in Australia have had on a sample of early childhood teachers working in the state of Queensland during 2010. The three focus questions for the study were:

- What do we know about the impact of teaching workloads on early childhood teachers?
- What do we need to know?
- What are the implications for policy and practice?

Findings from the study indicate there is more work to be done in order to fully respond to these research questions. However, the data presented in this paper provides some insight into the experiences of professional early childhood educators in the midst of two major reform agendas. The delivery of high quality early childhood education experiences with caring professionals is essential to the future of all children. Therefore, it is critical that early childhood teachers have good working conditions in order to achieve this goal. Consideration must be given to the work-life balance of early childhood educators to ensure that they are well-placed to meet the requirements of both the quality reform agenda and the requirements of the new national curriculum. Investing in our early childhood teachers in this way has the potential to prove highly beneficial to early years learners. Further investigations of Australian early childhood teacher workloads based upon the findings from this study and its recommendations for further research may assist in the advancement of research in both early childhood education and workforce research.

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TABLES FOR: The Cost of Quality and Coherence: An Investigation of Early Childhood Teacher Workloads in Australia

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Participants' Gender

Gender	<i>N</i>	Percent
Female	70	97
Male	2	3
TOTAL	72	100

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Participants' Age

Age Range	<i>N</i>	Percent
20–29	15	21
30–39	19	26
40–49	22	31
50+	16	22
TOTAL	72	100

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Participants' Previous Qualifications

Acquired Qualification	<i>N</i>	Percent
Non-specified teaching qualification	3	4
Diploma	11	15
Bachelor degree	41	57
Graduate Diploma	4	6
Master degree	7	10
Doctoral degree	1	1
No response	5	7
TOTAL	72	100

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Participants' Work Status

Work Status	<i>N</i>	Percent
Full time	65	90
Part time	2	3
Contract	5	7
TOTAL	72	100

Table 5: Frequency Distribution of Years Employed as an Early Childhood Teacher

Years Employed as an Early Childhood Teacher	<i>N</i>	Percent
Less than 6	26	36
7–10	16	22
More than 10	30	42
TOTAL	72	100

About the Authors

Dr. Danielle Twigg

Dr. Danielle Twigg has recently been appointed as Lecturer to the School of Education and Professional Studies (Brisbane, Logan) following careers as an Early Years teacher and researcher in both Australia and North America. Danielle has worked as Senior Program Officer for the Office for Early Childhood Education and Care, Department of Education and Training (Queensland Government) on strategic initiatives in relation to achieving universal access to quality kindergarten program for all Queensland children.

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