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Early childhood education and care: The politics of existing ‘in between’

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Early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals have long held claim to the early childhood knowledge base. In doing so, particular knowledge and skills have been compartmentalized as existing as core business only in the care and education sectors. This is highly problematic when work in the early years is undertaken across the health, community and education sectors. If the early years’ knowledge base is to inform all practice with children zero to eight years and their families, then it is more important for it to be considered ‘transdisciplinary’, rather than as owned by any one particular discipline or sector. It is important for it to be part of core business in the health and community services sectors, as well as in ECEC, so it can exist in between care and education, be less siloed and have an influence on all related disciplines where necessary.

This paper examines what it means to exist ‘in between’ the care and education sectors. To do so, the author uses an example of a program that is already positioned in between these two sectors. This program, the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies is examined as a case study in this paper, to highlight the constraints and enablers that are present for professionals who graduate with this qualification. In short, the paper presents the idea of existing in between as currently ‘impossible’.

Introduction

In ECEC, practice exists across the health, education and community services sectors. This means that the ECEC knowledge base actually spans these three disciplines. However, when positioning ECEC in the community in Australia, it is unlikely that this knowledge base is thought of as existing in these three sectors. More often than not, ECEC is considered either to be part of the care sector, most commonly child care or the education sector.

This notion of ECEC as part of either the care sector or the education sector positions this knowledge base in silos and constrains its ability to span multiple disciplines as it should be able to do. As Moss (2006) attests, competition between discourses such as those that include care and education is highly problematic as this competition prevents the discourse from being recognised from multiple perspectives. This means that ECEC can only be understood in two ways – as care or as education. It simply cannot be seen as existing in multiple disciplines or as existing across multiple disciplines.
Such a notion is quite problematic for ECEC in the current political climate in Australia. At present, the ECEC sector is being encouraged to engage in integrated practice. Ultimately, this means that ECEC professionals are being encouraged to engage with professionals from other disciplines to develop shared practice, language and vision and implement the delivery of seamless services for children zero to eight years and their families. This method of practice is being mandated in policy so that children and families are not subjected to multiple interventions but rather, can engage in one space with multiple professionals all of whom are “on the same page” with respect to the families’ needs.

Such policy changes have been mandated in government policies nationally in the Towards the development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood (2003), the concomitant Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) (2004-2009), and state-wide in Towards an Early Years Strategy (EYS) (2006), and most recently the federal government’s Family Support Program (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA), (2009-2014). Additionally, a recent COAG (2009) policy document entitled Investing in the early years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy has a much more specific approach to the notion of integrated practice. Based on an ecological model (p.15) the document suggests an “integrated early childhood development” approach to practice. These policy directions are reasonably new additions to the sector and have been introduced to promote a new unified focus on the early years, covering loosely the zero to eight year age group.

While the notion of integrated practice is appropriate in theory, there are constraints to this way of working. One such constraint relates to the silos of practice that exist across the related sectors of health, community services and education. Another constraint relates specifically to the positioning of ECEC as mentioned above. If ECEC is positioned as has been stated so far in this paper, then its identity within integrated practice settings is minimized. This means that it will be difficult for ECEC professionals to assert any authority within these new integrated settings as their knowledge base could well be marginalized instead of being considered from multiple perspectives within multiple contexts.

**Existing in between**

The impact of such a lack of authority can be understood as follows. Clearly, health professionals and community services professionals work with children zero to eight years and their families from their own disciplinary perspectives in multiple contexts. It would be more desirable for such professionals to ensure that, within this work, they are drawing on the contemporary early years’ knowledge base to implement and augment their practice. This would guarantee that the work that was being delivered was underpinned by a shared language and vision and was referencing all of the information from the contemporary ECEC knowledge base to it. If this is not done, then the early year’s services that are being delivered are being underpinned by ECEC practice as it is understood in health and/or community services, that is, as medicalised in health and as part of holistic community development in community services. ECEC knowledge and skills are not considered core business in these disciplines because they are positioned in the community as either education or
care not as health or community services or as transdisciplinary. This means that such knowledge and skills will likely be somewhat overshadowed by other knowledge bases, when they should actually be the centre of the practice for work with children zero to eight years and their families.

In order for the ECEC sector to have any influence in integrated contexts it would be preferable for this knowledge base to be considered transdisciplinary. Transdisciplinary professionals are able to work across disciplines, rather than merely engaging in service delivery from one perspective. This means that ECEC should not be positioned as either care or education but that it should exist in between the two. Existing in between allows ECEC to be more fluid and thus, to be viewed as underpinning many different disciplines where work with young children and their families are required. This positioning should enhance the possibility of ECEC knowledge and skills being identified as critical to any service delivery that involves children zero to eight years and their families. At present in Australia, this is not necessarily the case.

**Aims and scope**

This paper examines the position of a program that exits in between care and education and that includes the ECEC knowledge base as part of its pedagogy. This program – *The Bachelor of Child and Family Studies* - is positioned in the *School of Human Services and Social Work* at *Griffith University*, Queensland, Australia. The program prepares its students to work in any context with children zero to eighteen years and their families, excluding education. In saying that, graduates of this program can work in schools where applicable and can work with disengaged students, however they are not registered teachers. Graduates from this program are prepared to work across disciplinary boundaries and develop knowledge and skills from the health, education and community services sectors. Thus, these graduates should be able to work in integrated settings and should be sought after for such work.

Therefore, while it should be possible for a program that encompasses such understanding, skills and knowledge to be highly successful in terms of attracting and retaining students, this is not always the case. The issue for this program is that while it is underpinned by knowledge from health, education and community services, it is not highly visible in any of these aforementioned sectors. Students who come into the program acquire a broad range of knowledge and skills but do not necessarily leave the program with a socially recognizable disciplinary identity.

**The case**

In order to investigate this anomaly and the problem of existing in between, this paper situates the *Bachelor of Child and Family Studies* as a case to be examined. The paper follows *Stake (1998)*, using certain procedures in terms of situating the *Bachelor of Child and Family Studies* as a case study. To do so, there is an examination of the following:

- The nature of the case;
- The historical background;
- The physical setting;
- Other contexts, including economic, political and social;
- Other cases through which the case is recognised;
- Those informants through whom the case can be known (Stake, 1998).

Included in this case study is an application of critical social theory, which enables an exploration of how the ECEC sector is discursively produced in Australia. Investigating the case in this way will allow the program to be opened up for scrutiny and will highlight the anomalies that are both constraining and enabling its position in the ECEC sector. Such investigation will also highlight that, while existing in between might be desirable, it is also quite problematic.

**The nature of the case, historical background and the physical setting**

The Bachelor of Child and Family Studies is a program situated in the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University in Logan, Queensland, Australia. It is an undergraduate program that is offered face to face on campus. Initially, the program existed in the Faculty of Education but for pragmatic reasons it was shifted to the Faculty of Health and into the School of Human Services in 1998.

The program focuses on content that spans human services, community development, childhood studies, ECEC, sociology, ethics and psychology. The program prepares graduates for work with children zero to eighteen years and their families in any relevant context. Even though the program focuses on pedagogy, the graduates of this program are not registered teachers. The organization of the program can be seen in the table below:

**Table 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Number studied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Development</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Studies 6-18 years / Development (Lifespan)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEC (transdisciplinary)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family violence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Placement</td>
<td>2 external; 2 embedded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electives</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interest in this program has increased over the years. In its early stages, it was not uncommon for the program to include only five students in some classes. Today classes attract twenty students indicating a four hundred percent increase.
Graduates of this program tend to be sought after once they graduate. This is because of their broad base of knowledge and expertise. While only about fifteen students graduate each year, it is common for all of them to be employed, either just before they graduate or very soon after, in a variety of occupations. Initially, some of the students were employed in child care but now they are ineligible for leadership roles relating to such a career, unless they take specific electives during their program. Graduates tend to be sought after in areas such as the Department of Child Safety, foster care services, family support services both government and non-government, early years integrated settings in a variety of roles, outside school hours care, community liaison roles in schools and work for the Department of Health. It is also possible for graduates to take up roles that are intended for social workers, psychologists or teachers. One such student has recently completed a role in a government schools program for the Department of Education, Training and Employment. Another student is employed in a prominent role in the Office for Early Childhood Education and Care. These students are attractive to employers as the knowledge and skills the graduates acquire are transferable across multiple contexts, which positions them favourably in the current practice climate.

Table 2: Graduate employment outcomes for 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>No of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Child Safety - Child Safety Officer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster care worker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous family support worker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee settlement officer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside School Hours Care</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Family team</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Day Care</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time off</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, even though these graduates are well positioned in the current practice climate, they are not necessarily always situated as preferred. Although their knowledge and skills are transdisciplinary and therefore, well suited to working in integrated settings, these graduates often have to “sell themselves” to the prospective employer as being suited to the position. This is because the degree program is not always understood by the employer in ways that enable a singular graduate identity, such as teacher or social worker. While these graduates may be comfortable in their own professional identity, they often have to explain this identity to prospective employers. This means that they are situated in between being highly preferred and not being understood.

Graduates from the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies program are childhood studies specialists and, because of the focus in their program on the early years, have the necessary knowledge and skills to be considered early years specialists. Their program includes work on early childhood development, learning, pedagogy and attachment. Prospective graduates learn how to position this knowledge in a health and community services framework, as well as in an ECEC framework. Therefore, they are taught to understand that there are
multiple perspectives to consider when engaging in practice with children zero to eight years and their families and also, that multiple knowledge bases are in play. They are taught to understand that quality information from all of these knowledge bases is necessary so that high quality early years’ practice is possible in these multiple contexts.

These notions are often demonstrated by comments from employers and placement supervisors. For example:

The … [second year] students are on placement there and were assigned this event to organise as a project. Their collective enthusiasm and mature approach to the event ensured not only smooth running but a greater understanding as the students contributed to the discussions as local voices. I believe that these projects are the foundations of collaborative working and cannot be underestimated in terms of learning about community engagement. The students were excellent ambassadors for the university, the school, our service and most importantly the local children and families. (Manager integrated early years service – April, 2011)

Interest in students is also expressed locally, particularly in relation to employment. The above-mentioned organization has employed two students in the past two years. Another non-government organization in the area has employed three in the past four years. Both of these organisations have a vision and mission to engage in integrated practice, amalgamating knowledge from early childhood education and care and community development. The main brief of both these organisations is to engage in integrated practice and promote transdisciplinary practice as a method of such engagement. While such a situation is being undertaken locally in some respects, it is not happening nationally. Integrated practice is still being mandated but no real infrastructure to encourage transdisciplinary practice in such settings is being made available.

**Why is transdisciplinarity important in this ECEC integrated context?**

Transdisciplinarity, focuses on inquiry rather than disciplines and uses the inquiry to manage the space between the disciplines. It complements other disciplinary approaches and creates space for the emergence of new data and new interactions as a result of encounters between disciplines. Therefore, a transdisciplinary ethic rejects any attitude that refuses dialogue and discussion, regardless of whether the origin of this attitude is ideological, scientific, religious, economic, political or philosophical. Shared knowledge should lead to a shared understanding based on an absolute respect for collaborative and collegial approaches that promote both collectiveness and individuality (Nicolescu, 2008).

The current complexity of ECEC in Australia highlights the need for professionals who can engage in such a way. As O’Brien (2002, p.4) states, (many) contexts are becoming “supercomplex” and it is this supercomplexity that adds to the challenges that are faced (Apgar, Argumendo & Allen, 2009). Moreover, such a process requires philosophical shifts, as expertise is reinvented and may move across disciplinary boundaries (O’Brien, 2002). This
situation is occurring in ECEC in Australia as policy reform calling for integrated practice is producing supercomplexity. Such policy reform implies a professional who can engage across disciplinary boundaries in ways that are suggested by transdisciplinarity and that enable improved service delivery for children and families.

**Policy and irony**

Such a situation is ironic in many respects. This policy call for early childhood professionals to engage in practice in integrated settings and be more transdisciplinary should suit Child and Family graduates. This policy change has been underpinned by recent government approaches to produce local environments that engender practices to support children and families and to target the notion of healthy families, thereby addressing certain social and systemic problems and disadvantages within communities as early as possible. These recent changes in policy direction have largely followed work in the United Kingdom around the notion of integrated practice (Department for Education, 2012). This U.K. work has been underpinned by literature producing the Sure Start program (David, Gooch, Powell & Abbot, 2003) and by the work of academics such as, Moss (2006), Moss and Petrie (2002), and Moss and Pence (1994). The policy changes in Australia have mirrored these U.K. directions, particularly in the work undertaken in the SFCS around the Communities for Children (CfC) project, which is still currently attracting funding. These policy moves are occurring alongside powerful discursive frameworks that produce and govern early ECEC practice. Thus, as Moss (2006) attests, such moves are highlighting differences rather than reducing fragmentation and make evident the obstacles to a more united approach that countries like New Zealand enjoy.

This highlighting of difference is part of a wider sociological understanding of how ECEC is understood in the community and also by government. This is largely due to the discursive production of a care and education dichotomy that is still at play in Australia and particularly, in Queensland. In recent years the ECEC field in Queensland has negotiated significant ECEC policy change (Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors (Queensland), 2006). In fact, it is in Queensland where some of the divisions between care practitioners/professionals (those with non-education qualifications obtained at training institutions or universities) and professionals (those with traditional education qualifications obtained at universities) in ECEC have been most strongly highlighted (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012). As early as 1988, Petrie explored the notion of the care and education dichotomy that was dividing the ECEC sector, arguing for a more streamlined approach to practice, which situated education and care more equitably. In the years since this paper, it is arguable that this dichotomy is alive and well, particularly in Queensland, (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2004). It is the situation of child care as “care only” in this state (Burton & Lyons, 2000) that works to produce an inequitable “game” on the Queensland ECEC field (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012).

Moreover, Elliott (2006) highlights such policy and practice fragmentation by stating that, while in the 1980s policy frameworks were designed to minimise the differences between care and education in early childhood services, more recently funding shifts, have widened the care/education dichotomy (Macfarlane
& Lewis, 2012). It is this care and education dichotomy that makes the professional situation of Bachelor of Child and Family Studies graduates more than a mere marketing issue and also highly problematic. While government and the community understands ECEC as either child care and/or education and nothing in between, then the notion of existing in between and meeting the criteria for a professional well suited to practice across disciplines in integrated settings is actually impossible. Thus, the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies graduates are positioned without an acceptable identity and essentially, as improper.

**Other contexts, other cases and informants**

This notion of impropriety is produced by and produces many constraints. While impropriety is a strong term, it is essentially how these graduates can be categorized. Instead of being understood as skilled professionals, these graduates can sometimes be seen by other professions as somehow, less than what they should be. Because the graduates are not teachers, not solely early childhood and not part of a Faculty of Education, they are often viewed in terms of what they are not rather than what they are. The fact that the graduates claim knowledge of early childhood is particularly problematic for them as they are not then able to claim the identity of early childhood educators and, if they do, they are positioned as “only” being part of the care sector. This is an issue as it causes their degree to be seen as less professional than an early childhood care and education degree and equivalent only to a vocational qualification, when clearly it is much more than that.

The care and education dichotomy produces competing discourses, which both constrain and enable professionals in the ECEC sector. Moss (2006) represents such a position in terms of the moves to integrated practice in the U.K.. Moss (2006) states that competition between pedagogic discourses and child care discourses is making the move to integrated practice in this country extremely difficult. This position of competing practice discourses is replicated and intensified in Australia, where reforms are moving quickly and where the care/education dichotomy is growing and not shrinking (Elliott, 2006), in relation to such reforms (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012). What is most apparent is that, unless the complexities that some of these policy initiatives create are fully understood and accommodated, then it is likely that new and exciting opportunities will be only achieved for a few (Macfarlane and Lewis, 2012) and the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies graduates will not be among them.

**Irony and consequences**

This notion is particularly ironic because in Australia it is currently being argued that ECEC pre-service training programs are not broad enough to cater for the complexities of integrated early years practice and that a new type of professional is needed. Margaret Sims (2010) states that the new reform agenda highlights the need for “a new profession for a new world” (2010, p.6) and that the label of “teacher” is loaded with perceptions that limit its usefulness in the current policy climate. Sims’ (2010) view is that recent research suggests a broader application of knowledge and skills in the preparation for ECEC professionals. Sims argues for a similar program to that of the Bachelor of Child
and Family Studies where essential elements would include: education and training in direct service delivery to children, families and communities; parent support and education programs; strengths-based practice; community development programs; mental health issues; family dynamics; social disadvantage; prejudice and anti-bias. Current early years' teacher education programs still have a strong focus on key learning areas and curriculum, which does not permit time for an in-depth approach to such above-mentioned components of knowledge and practice (Watson, 2006).

To take on board Sims' view is to re-think important aspects of working across health, community services and education and to embed those aspects into ECEC degree preparation programs. This would mean that a broader balance would need to be created between key learning areas and core courses from other disciplines in order that an authentic balance is possible. Currently, the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies manages such a balance across three years. This program is also part of a combined degree program – the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies/Bachelor of Education (Primary) that manages this balance and includes key learning areas across four and a half years. The point is that such a balance is possible and, if implemented, would address some issues of concern for the ECEC sector.

The above information indicates that the current anomalies and fragmentation in the ECEC sector is producing unintended consequences for early childhood teachers as well as Child and Family graduates. For early childhood teachers, who have long made claim to the early years’ knowledge base, this current policy climate is creating significant tension. Researchers such as, Cheeseman (2007), Fenech et al. (2010), Macfarlane, Cartmel and Nolan, (2008), Moss, (2006, 2010) and Wong Sumsion and Press, (2012) have highlighted the problematic nature of current policy reform in relation to its contribution to the professional identity of early years teachers and other early years professionals and the possible marginalisation of the ECEC knowledge base.

Additionally, Macfarlane et al. (2008) argue that this possible marginalisation will become increasingly problematic, as it will limit the possibility of early years teachers and other early years professionals, such as Bachelor of Child and Family Studies graduates, being identified as leaders in integrated contexts. This means that it is likely that early years’ leadership will be the domain of professionals whose knowledge bases are more “powerful” and also more focused on the notions of intervention and prevention. This afore-mentioned situation does not enhance capacity building or sustainability in the ECEC sector and leads to confusion and fragmentation for the educators who engage in early years’ practice in integrated settings, to say nothing of the issues that are created for the children and families whom these educators serve. This situation means that early childhood teachers and other early years professionals will not be viewed as being able to cross disciplinary boundaries. Unless they can argue differently, their knowledge base may be subsumed by other “medicalised” early years’ approaches, such as that of developmentally appropriate practice, with more contemporary understandings, such as socio-cultural theory, becoming sidelined.

It can be seen then that the politics of existing in between has consequences well beyond those cited for graduates of the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies. The compartmentalization of the early years' knowledge base as either
care or education, situates ECEC professionals problematically and minimizes the fact that such professionals often engage in holistic practices that reach far beyond such sectors. While many in the ECEC sector already view ECEC professionals as transdisciplinary, their association with more mono-disciplinary fields such as education and care can delimit community understanding of their expertise and ability. Additionally, ECEC teachers and other educators are not necessarily taught to be transdisciplinary, whereas the graduates that are in between – the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies graduates - are taught to do so. It may well be time for the ECEC sector to provide pre-service programs that encompass more of a transdisciplinary early years’ approach to practice like that in the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies. Such a move would address the negative consequences that current policy reform is enabling.

If this occurs, then the way in which ECEC is understood could change. ECEC professionals could be understood as transdisciplinary within the community and as able to implement their knowledge and skills across sectors. This would mean that the ECEC knowledge base would become core business across health, community services and education and would underpin all practices relating to children zero to eight years and their families. Such a situation would allow less siloed practice and would enable the creation of a shared language and vision for service delivery. Thus, existing in between would not be so problematic and would therefore, not be impossible, enabling integrated practice to occur more authentically.

However, for this to occur, all ECEC professionals would need to advocate for each other in a more united approach (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012). As such, ECEC professionals would be arguing for transdisciplinarity and would need to refuse any association with mono-disciplinarity and the sectors that encourage such practices. This would mean that ECEC professionals would be called on to work within and against (Lather, 1996) their educational understandings in order to encompass relevant understandings from health and community services and apply such understandings where necessary. This is undoubtedly a tricky task.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the situation of the ECEC knowledge base. The author has argued that this knowledge base should be considered transdisciplinary and not as existing only as part of care and education but as existing in between these two fields so that it can be utilized in other sectors such as health and community services. However, by conducting a case study on the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies, a program that currently exists in between these two disciplines of care and education, it is also argued that existing in between in the current policy climate is essentially impossible due to the way that ECEC is discursively produced in Australia. Thus, ECEC professionals in Australia are encouraged to consider transdisciplinarity more fully and to refuse notions of mono-disciplinarity so that services for children zero to eight years and their families in integrated settings can be delivered more authentically.
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