

Education or care? Childcare or school? Pre-service teacher perspectives on teaching in the childcare sector

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In Western Australia (WA) early learning centres, also referred to as childcare centres, are required by law to employ at least one degree qualified teacher. As such, graduates from early childhood degree programs are able to seek employment as a teacher across the school and childcare sectors. This paper presents research that investigated pre-service early childhood teachers' perspectives on teaching within the early learning sector in WA. The impetus was to ascertain pre-service teachers' perspectives of the childcare sector, specifically how they viewed the role of the teacher in this context. Perspectives were gathered before and again after a ten week professional experience within a centre. A mixed methods approach was adopted to facilitate the collection of data by survey and interview. Quantitative survey data were analysed through statistical analysis and compiling percentage and frequency graphs. Qualitative interview data were transcribed and coded to determine emerging themes. Findings illustrated that whilst education and care has become a unified concept at the policy level, an education-care dichotomy continues to exist within the early learning sector. Implications arising from this disconnect relate to staffing, conditions and the quality of experiences afforded to children. These implications highlight the need for Australian governments to investigate international approaches for creating unity in early learning centres.

Introduction: Education and care in Western Australia

Early childhood education and early childhood care have historically been positioned at opposing ends of a continuum. Early childhood care, as a service outside of the home, has traditionally been the responsibility of the childcare sector, originating from the century old model of day nurseries, staffed by nurses and with a focus on care (Brennan, 1998). At the other end of the continuum, schools staffed by teachers, have historically held responsibility for early childhood education outside of the home. This organisational separation has enabled the education-care dichotomy that currently exists, whereby childcare has been relegated to the realm of care and education deemed the remit of schools. This organisational division endured until the *National Quality Framework (NQF)* (COAG, 2009) was launched in 2009 (Brennan, 2009, in Bowes & Grace, 2009). The Australian Government's policy initiative, the NQF (COAG, 2009), was an attempt to bridge this historical education-care dichotomy as a course for responding to international findings indicating the need to raise quality within the early years. In particular, international research suggested that children who experienced a high level of quality in education and care settings in the formative and pivotal years before the commencement of formal schooling demonstrated improved outcomes for success within their later educational achievements (OECD, 2006; Manning, Wong, Fleming & Garvis, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Tayler, 2012). The reverse was also found to be true; young children who experience poor quality care and education in the early years demonstrate a reduction in education and social outcomes (Manning et al., 2019; Menchini, 2010).

A key finding articulated by the OECD (2006) was that Australia, as a nation, was falling well behind other countries of comparable economic status relative to both investment in the early years and overall educational output in general. A connection was made between these two findings; the correlation between investment in early childhood care and education and lifelong social and educational outcomes is well documented (Currie, 2009; Heckman, 2007). The OECD's (2006) report called on the Australian Government to invest in the early years to bring about a more cohesive, integrated and unified approach to promoting quality by developing a sectorial structure where care and education were integrated physically, philosophically and pedagogically. In responding to this call, the Australian Government, within their *NQF* (COAG, 2009) set down a clear commitment to increasing the quality of care and education experiences for children aged birth to eight years. Since the inception of the *NQF* (COAG, 2009), the Mitchell Institute reported that as of 2020 the Australian government had made a 140% increase in investment in the early years (Hurely, Noble & Jackson, 2020).

One of the most prominent changes within the evolving policy context has been the introduction of a degree qualified teacher within early learning centres, and this requirement has caused repercussions within the sector. The aims of the requirement were to unite education and care settings, thus responding to international recommendations on raising quality in the early years. International research supports the role of the qualified early childhood teacher within early learning centres, and this role is deemed as key to quality improvement (Liu & Boyd, 2020). The teacher, in contrast to the other educators, is defined by a qualification at degree level. The research presented in this paper sought to gain an understanding of the impact of this requirement by investigating the perspectives of early childhood pre-service teachers (N=30) prior to, and at the conclusion of, a 10 week professional practice experience in an early learning centre as one component of their undergraduate teaching qualification.

The education-care dichotomy: What the literature tell us

Evidenced based research, internationally, calls attention to the need for early childhood services to be of a high quality. Research in the fields of neuro-science, education and the social sciences all suggest that high quality early childhood services result in positive long term outcomes for the individual, and for wider society (National Investment for the Early Years [NIFTeY], 2009). Existing research evidences the benefits of high quality early learning contexts, particularly in relation to children's social, emotional and cognitive development (Slot, Leseman, Verhagen & Mulder, 2015). Research suggests that a combination of structural quality with process quality is the most desired (Thomason & La Paro, 2009). Structural quality pertains to aspects such as group size, teacher qualifications and child to teacher ratios, whilst process quality aspects include relationships and pedagogy (Slot et al., 2015). The recognition of the importance of quality education and care has, as a result, found its way into Western economies whereby policy has begun to reflect the need to raise the standards of both structural and process quality aspects within the early years as a priority (Logan, 2017; Thorpe, Milliar & Petriwskyj, 2012).

Raising standards in the childcare sector has been predominantly focused on a holistic view of learning that observes care and education as inseparable concepts (Van Laere, Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012). In particular, literature suggests that to address quality in the early childhood sector the emphasis must be on building cohesion across what has been historically regarded as a fragmented education and care sector (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Greenberg & Loeb, 2016). This recognition for the early learning sector as intrinsically educational has resulted in a growing awareness of the need for unification and integration with care and education; disciplines that traditionally have been viewed as dichotomous by policy makers internationally (O'Connor, McGunnigle, Treasure & Davie, 2014).

Degree qualified teachers in early learning centres: A quality initiative

The introduction of degree qualified teachers within early childhood centres is an example of a quality initiative within the sector and is supported by international research (Liu & Boyd, 2020; Manning et al., 2019). “The early childhood workforce is routinely demonstrated as being central to the quality of early childhood education and care” (Campbell-Barr, 2017, p. 45). Research reports a large variance in what constitutes the qualification for working in early childhood, with some countries insisting on degree level qualifications, whilst others do not (Campbell-Barr, 2017). The fragmented landscape of education and care in Australia is exaggerated by the requirement for degree qualified teachers in early learning centres, despite discrepancies remaining regarding income and conditions. For the same teaching degree qualification, the pay and conditions are significantly reduced for those who obtain employment in early learning centres as compared to the school sector. This difference in remuneration and conditions correlates to a difference in status and ultimately results in a transient workforce, who take teaching opportunities in early learning centres as an interim to teaching in a school, leading to recruitment and retention concerns (McKinlay, Irvine & Farrell, 2018). The lack of continuity that arises from teachers leaving the sector when a better option arises in a school goes against the aims of reforms to raise quality in the early years (Jovanovic, 2013). Research also suggests that educators with higher qualifications are more likely to engage in more sensitive play and interactions with children, bringing greater holistic educational outcomes to the experience (Rouse, Morrissey & Rahimi, 2012) and therefore these educators who are leaving for a better option are, in fact, what the sector requires to improve quality.

Early learning centre practicums within teaching degree qualifications

Existing research explicitly targets the complex role of the qualified teacher within the context of early learning centres. A New York investigation, known as the Recchia and Shin Study (2010), explored the beliefs and experiences of pre-service early childhood teachers undertaking a practicum with infants. The findings from this study indicated that practical experiences in the sector enabled pre-service teachers to re-think their traditional beliefs about the needs of infants and their sense of themselves as teachers (Recchia &

Shin, 2010). Many of the pre-service teachers expressed initial shock and fear in the foreign infant setting and then wrestled with their identity as a teacher, in particular, acknowledging the complexity of the nature and purpose of the teacher in this context. The Recchia and Shin Study (2010) also found that as participants were encouraged to observe children, without engaging with them, they began to realise the depth of the work involved. Pre-verbal infants engaged with educators using gestures and minimal language. In addition to the power of observation the pre-service teachers learnt about the intimacy associated with caregiving and how to manage a professional emotional relationship as an avenue for education. The study showed that the professional role of the infant caregiver is a highly involved and intricate one that requires specific skills and knowledge (Recchia & Shin, 2010).

Employment choices of graduates: Childcare or schools?

Under the *NQF* (COAG, 2009), early learning centres are required to employ at least one degree qualified early childhood teacher and graduates from early childhood degree programs are able to seek employment across the school and childcare sectors. However, despite this Government initiative, research suggests that the recruitment and retention of early childhood teachers in early learning centres remains very difficult (Irvine et al., 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Productivity Commission, 2014), particularly as early learning centres compete with schools for teachers. Previous Australian studies have shown that a significant portion of early childhood graduate teachers do not want to work in early learning centres (O'Connor et al., 2014; Thorpe et al., 2011) with many preferring to work in the school sector (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Harrison et al., 2017). As previously discussed, this is most often attributed to differences in wages, conditions and professional status (Chong & Lu, 2019).

However, the review of the *Early childhood and care workforce action plan 2011-2014* found that fewer students were studying to become early childhood teachers (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2014). Additionally, a 2016 study which surveyed 1200 early childhood educators and degree qualified teachers working in early learning centres and preschools across Australia revealed one in five were planning to leave their job within a year in search of better pay and conditions (Irvine et al., 2016). Furthermore, the study also found that educators who took up further training or upgraded to an early childhood teaching degree were most likely to leave (Irvine et al., 2016). The existing and projected shortage of early childhood degree-qualified teachers who are willing to work in early learning centres presents a critical challenge in realising the national early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy objectives. Existing studies highlight the dearth of research in this area, calling for research into pre-service teachers' decision making for career choice (Liu & Boyd, 2020); the findings in this paper respond to this call.

Research design

The overarching research question leading this investigation was, *what are pre-service teachers' perspectives of early learning centres as a context for them as teachers?* The research sub-questions pertaining to the findings presented in this paper were, *how is the role of the teacher in early*

learning centres perceived by pre-service early childhood teachers? And, what factors would influence pre-service teachers when they're considering employment opportunities in early learning centres? The aim of the investigation was to establish the perspectives of these pre-service teachers prior to, and at the conclusion of, a ten week practicum experience in an early learning centre catering for children from birth to five years of age. Pre-service teachers attend the centre Monday to Friday for an eight hour working day, for ten consecutive weeks. This ten week practicum occurs in the third year of a four year Bachelor's degree in early childhood education accrediting graduates to teach across birth to age eight contexts. Whilst undertaking the practicum, pre-service teachers are supervised by an allocated mentor at the centre and they are visited on three occasions by a University supervisor. Pre-service teachers are tasked with preparing a portfolio to evidence their practice against the National Quality Standard.

Adopting a mixed methods approach to this research provided the opportunity for both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected, permitting an in depth understanding to be gained. Literature asserts the benefits of mixed methods research, stating that such an approach affords "a more complete understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data alone" (Creswell, 2014, p. 19). In this investigation, quantitative and qualitative data sets were analysed in isolation and then compared, which is a common model within mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014). In this research, quantitative surveys were used initially, followed by individual semi-structured interviews. Including both methods of data collection added to the comprehensive nature of this investigation.

Quantitative methods

The quantitative method of surveys was employed to ascertain the pre-service teachers' perspectives of their upcoming practicum in the early learning sector. The surveys were administered, as a hard-copy, to pre-service teachers both pre and post the ten week practicum. Survey was viewed as an appropriate tool as it provided for the collection of numerical data, related to attitudes and opinions, and this method is supported in the literature (Creswell, 2014). The pre-service teachers were presented with 22 items on the quantitative survey, against which they rated on a continuum a response from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The 22 items on the survey related to their feelings towards seeking employment in the early learning sector, their views on education and care in the early years, and their views on the conditions of employment within the early learning sector. The survey is presented in Appendix 1. A total of 30 participants provided consent and took part in the survey and these were completed anonymously. The survey had been previously trialled and modified to avoid ambiguous language, as is recommended (Neuman, 2011). At the completion of the practicum experience, participants were surveyed using the same tool so that a comparison between pre and post perspectives could occur within the analysis phase. The pre and post survey was completed by 30 participants.

Qualitative methods

Qualitative research methods consist of the gathering, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of *narrative* information (Tashakkori, Johnson & Teddlie 2020, p. 6). In this investigation, the narrative information was collected from participants in the form of individual semi-structured interviews. As a mixed methods approach was employed, quantitative surveys were administered initially, and interviews were conducted as a means of gathering more comprehensive information on the pre-service teachers' perspectives both pre and post the practicum experience. Of the 30 participants who consented to complete the survey, seventeen consented and took part in the pre and post interviews.

A semi-structured format of interview was deemed most appropriate as it allowed the researcher to probe and to follow topics as they arose (Smith, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to “facilitate and guide rather than dictate” (Smith, 2015, p. 63), and therefore a set of open-ended questions were used to guide the interview. Participants who had completed the survey and provided consent for interview took part in this qualitative method and interviews lasted approximately one hour. At the conclusion of the practicum, and after the completion of the post practicum survey, pre-service teachers were again interviewed using the same open-ended questions. Questions included, for example; *‘How do/did you feel about undertaking a ten week practicum in an early learning centre?’*; *‘What do you see as your role as a teacher in an early learning setting?’*; *‘Which sector, early learning centre or school, would you seek employment in and why?’*. Both sets of interviews (pre and post) were digitally recorded and then transcribed. At interview, participants were allocated a pseudonym in order to de-identify the data. The interview questions are included in Appendix 1 for reference.

Data analysis and comparison

Mixed method approaches require that the quantitative and qualitative data are analysed as an integrated set (Tashakkori, Johnson & Teddlie, 2020). Firstly, quantitative data were analysed using statistical analysis and compiling percentage and frequency graphs for each of the 22 items. Following this, the qualitative data, in the form of transcripts, were analysed using a thematic coding method. The coding method required that the transcripts were read repeatedly and coded to draw out themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the coding process, open coding was used initially whereby major themes within individual transcripts are identified (Babbie, 2016). Selective coding was then used to determine major themes across all interview transcripts. Once the data sets were analysed in isolation, the survey items and interviews were compared. Validity of the findings was ensured through the comparison of themes drawn from the narrative data being compared with the statistical data gained through the survey analysis.

Participant selection

Purposive sampling was used as the method for participant selection within this investigation. Utilising a non-random sample, the researchers identified all possible cases of a highly specific sample (Neuman, 2011) for this research, that being, pre-service

teachers undertaking an early childhood qualification and about to embark on a ten week practicum in the early learning context. The target population were invited to participate during a pre-requisite class for the practicum and they were provided with written consent forms to participate in both the survey and interview aspects of the research. A total of 30 female participants (from a possible 38 females) consented and took part in the survey research. Of the 30, seventeen consented and took part in the pre and post interviews.

Compliance with ethical standards

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants, as was the case in this investigation, were in accordance with the ethical standards of the tertiary institution research committee that provided ethical clearance and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study, for both the quantitative and qualitative components. Participants were made aware, through both an information letter and the consent form, of their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Findings

Quantitative and qualitative findings are presented in response to the sub-questions that guided this investigation, namely, *how is the role of the teacher in early learning centres perceived by pre-service early childhood teachers?* And, *what factors would influence pre-service teachers when they're considering employment opportunities in early learning centres?*

How is the role of the teacher in early learning centres perceived by pre-service early childhood teachers?

The conceptualisation of early learning centres as a context for the unification of education and care was identified by the participants of this study. When participants were asked whether care was more important than education in this context, 12% disagreed prior to the practicum. However, when posed the same question post the practicum experience this increased to 36%. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which also illustrates that a large number of participants were uncertain about the balance of education and care in the early learning context and it is possible that the 65% that selected 'neither' viewed education and care to be of equal importance.

Furthermore, interview data revealed pre-service teachers' support for the value of a unified approach toward education and care. Pre-service teachers spoke strongly of their view that they were essentially engaged in the teaching profession because they cared. Examples of participant responses included:

You can teach through the care process ... both support each other ... both are important. (Pre-Service Teacher A)

I think they cross over ... to educate you should care and a carer should educate ... I think they're both pretty much equally as important as each other. (Pre-Service Teacher B)

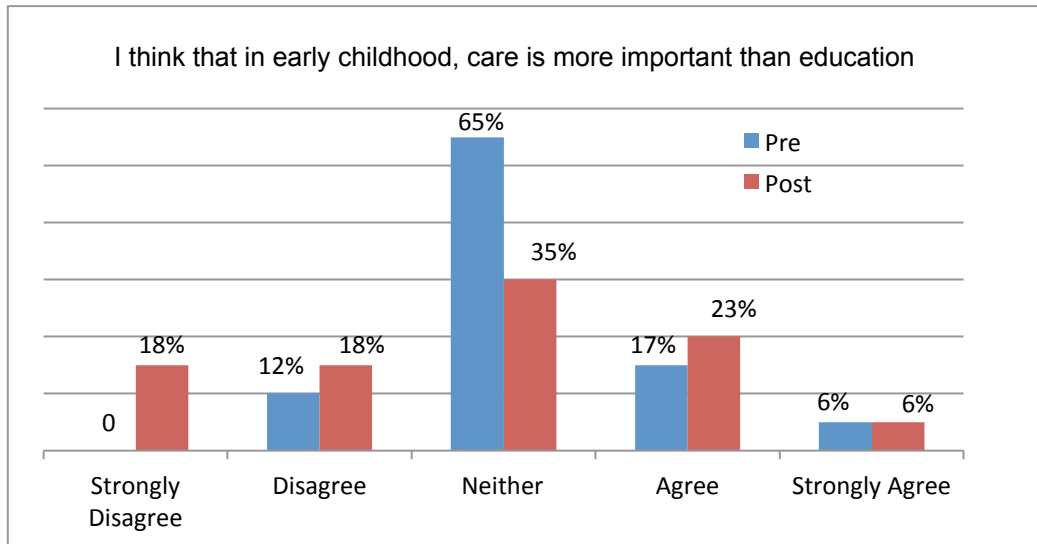


Figure 1: Percentage of pre-service teachers who identified care as more important than education

Additionally, pre-service teachers' perspectives of the early learning sector were influenced by how they felt about their overall practicum experience. Findings illustrated that positive experiences on practicum were connected to a willingness to seek employment in early learning centres. For example:

I went in not really knowing if it was something I wanted to do or not, I was made to feel so welcome that I really loved it. I would totally think of it as a future opportunity.
(Pre-Service Teacher C)

What factors would influence pre-service teachers when they're considering employment opportunities in early learning centres?

For the pre-service teachers in this study, a feeling of disempowerment was expressed from the practicum experience and this resulted in many pre-service teachers feeling deterred in considering taking up employment in early learning centres in the future. More specifically, data illustrated that prior to the practicum experience 88% viewed themselves as solely a school-based teacher. When compared to the post-practicum data, this increased to 94% of participants identifying their vision of themselves as a school-based, rather than centre-based teacher. Figure 2 illustrates this finding.

The qualitative data further elucidates this increase to a school-based professional identity as being closely related to the inequity of status across the sectors as well as to the pre-service teachers' feelings of discontent whilst on practicum within the early learning environment. Pre-service teachers responded with statements such as:

I don't think teachers are welcome within childcare. I didn't feel welcome and I won't be going back. (Pre-Service Teacher D)

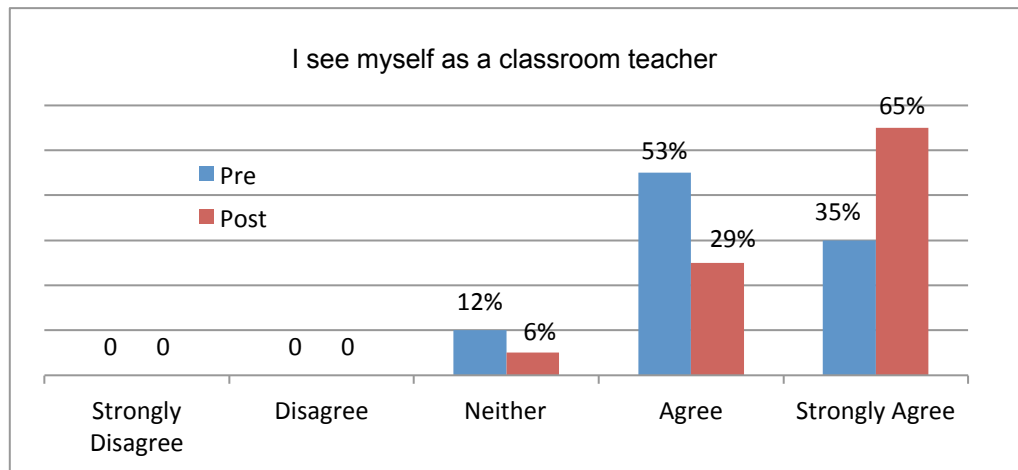


Figure 2: Percentage of pre-service teachers who identified themselves as school-based teachers

If they don't want me then I don't want them. (Pre-Service Teacher E)

I think she (educator) was angry because she doesn't like her job; well actually that's not wholly fair, she does like the work itself but not the fact that everyone thinks it's a basic job that doesn't take any skill. It's so unfair on them really. They actually need as much knowledge and skills as a teacher does, probably more if I am being totally honest. (Pre-Service Teacher E)

The pre-service teachers within this study frequently commented on issues of inequity they experienced within the early learning centre context. Pre-service teachers remarked that they were challenged by the interpersonal dynamics, between themselves and staff, in regards to authority and status. For example, pre-service teachers made the following comments during the interview:

She belittled teachers every chance she could. It was like an opportunity for her to pay us back for how much more status teachers have in the overall education community by showing us how little we have within Childcare. (Pre-Service Teacher M)

I was made to feel kind of worthless from the start, the girls in my room didn't even use my name, they just called me student. (Pre-Service Teacher K)

I don't know how many times a day I heard 'what would you know you are only a student.' I think they had a hang up about the degree and went out of their way to belittle it. (Pre-Service Teacher F)

Additionally, the pre-service teachers commented on the discrepancy between pay and conditions between the school and early learning sectors.

I reckon Childcare is just as important and they do just as much work, so I don't understand why they don't get the same benefits. (Pre-Service Teacher A)

I think carers in childcare aren't seen as highly qualified ... I think classroom teachers are more valued and more reputable. (Pre-Service Teacher M)

Childcare workers are looked down on more than teachers...childcare's probably not as rewarded as it should be, not as recognised ... maybe because school is compulsory and childcare isn't. (Pre-Service Teacher L)

Discussion

This investigation sought to investigate pre-service teachers' perspectives of teaching within early learning centres. Perspectives were gathered both prior to and at the conclusion of a ten week early learning centre practicum. The practicum occurred as a compulsory course in the third year of a four year teaching qualification. The findings presented in this paper are discussed within three themes, namely; education and care - yet to be unified; inequity of status; same degree and same profession, yet different conditions. The implications of these findings are then explored with reference to both national and international contexts.

Education and care – yet to be unified

The findings from this investigation clearly illustrated that whilst a physical shift has occurred to integrate education *and* care in early learning centres, this shift has not transpired to the philosophical or pedagogical level and rather remains largely as a policy directive. The Australian Government's vision to move away from the historic dichotomous relationship between education and care toward creating a unified and integrated context for children's holistic development in the early years remains fragmented at the centre level. Whilst the Government's initiatives to unify education and care is recognition of the positive impact such an approach can have on long term outcomes for children, more is still needed to enact change at the centre level. In 2018 early learning centres were accessed by over 925,900 children under the age of 5 and this growth trends is likely to continue as the number of families accessing these services continues to grow (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey (2019) with more people using early childhood education and care services, and governments lifting the bar for quality, Australia will still need to recruit over 6,500 degree-qualified early childhood teachers prior to 2024, as well as over 30,000 more educators with vocational diplomas and certificates.

The dissatisfaction of the educators employed in early learning centres is also increasing. Retention of early childhood teachers in early learning centres continues to add to the issues within the sector (McDonald et al., 2018). Staff turnover within the sector is therefore high (McKinlay et al., 2018). Many educators agree that if leaving the sector was a viable option for them, they would (Jovanovic, 2013). Although successful at the policy level, the unification of education and care at the philosophical and pedagogical level continues to be an issue requiring attention, particularly if the aim to raise quality in the early years remains.

The findings from this investigation clearly presented a case that the fragmented relationship between education and care remains and this reinforces previous research surrounding teacher identity. The concept of identity for teachers was investigated in Gibson's (2013) work, in which pre-service teacher's perspectives on undertaking employment within the childcare sector was explored. Gibson (2013) noted that pre-service teachers were completing a childcare practicum as part of their degree but struggled to see their role in childcare once qualified. In essence, pre-service teachers were struggling with the identity of themselves as a 'teaching professional' in a sector where discourse concerned 'care' rather than 'education'.

Inequity of status

The interpersonal power dynamic that the pre-service teachers in this study were exposed to relates directly to the divisive state of education and care. The tension presented in the data between the role of the educator and the role of the qualified teacher appears to be a reaction against the injustice embedded within the differences in recognition; recognition for work with children that is classified as care and work with children that is classified as education. The inadvertent disempowering of teachers within early learning centres has been documented beyond this study (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013). Chong and Lu (2019) suggested improving early years' teachers' professional self be the first step towards strengthening the sector (p. 54). The type of experience pre-service teachers endured in their early learning centres whilst on practicum greatly impacts on their perceived future within the sector. The "lack of professionalism afforded to teachers leads to a decline in self-esteem ... as well as a deterioration among those who wish to join or remain in the field" (Chong & Lu, 2019, p. 54). Therefore, feelings attached to pre-service teachers' time spent in childcare leaves a lasting impression and undoubtedly affects whether they remain receptive and optimistic to a career in early learning centres following the practicum. Where the experience was encouraging and the overall feeling a positive one, the connection to centres as a future career option was consolidated; where the experience and feeling was negative, the connection was broken. Similar findings were articulated in the Australian study by Thorpe et al. (2012) that investigated pre-service teachers' views on childcare. The findings from the Thorpe et al. (2012) research affirmed the link between positive experiences on practicum and willingness to seek employment in the childcare sector.

Same degree and same profession, yet different conditions

The leading cause of discontent within the early learning sector was the different pay and conditions experienced by teachers, dependent upon whether they were employed in a centre or a school. Despite the research evidencing conjointly the equal importance of both roles (Thorpe et al., 2012) and the importance of their integration (O'Connor et al., 2014), the practical divide between teaching in the two sectors is significant. Opportunities for teachers within the school sector are considerably higher, for example, in regards to further qualification, professional status, professional recognition, rates of pay and working conditions including leave arrangements.

Teaching, as a profession, consists of a set of ethical guidelines, of roles and responsibilities and as with any profession society holds individuals working in these professions accountable to these. Regardless of the context for teaching, the same expectations apply. Current pay scales indicate that four year trained teachers who choose to be employed in the early learning sector earn significantly less income than their school sector equivalent: same degree and same profession, yet very different conditions. When the teacher employed in a centre is compared to other educators in the centre context, the gap in pay and conditions is further exaggerated. The status, pay and conditions are less for centre educators because the training period is substantially less in terms of both time investment, cost for training and competitive entry. However, when the importance of the task is analysed, this argument is compromised. On the premise that it is the children who are most important within the entire education and care sector, it is necessary to recognise the inequality that exists for educators in their ability to up-skill and become degree educated while employed as an educator within a centre. Confining centre educators to low paid, low status positions at the same time as requiring degree qualified teachers to be their colleagues is inevitably going to produce discontent and further dichotomise the sector; a very different outcome to the aim of raising quality by promoting unification and integration.

The quality of children's experiences in childcare is well documented to be closely related to the level of qualification of the educator (Liu & Boyd, 2020; Manning et al., 2019; Rouse et al., 2012). True integration of education and care within the sector should empower childcare educators to seek degree qualification and thereby raise the level of education within each level of each centre and not merely the micro level at which the teacher is empowered to enact change (Garrock & Morrissey, 2013).

Implications

Raising qualifications of staff within the early learning sector will, undoubtedly, become an economics debate. Parental fees, however, cannot realistically be expected to meet the costs of up-skilling the centre-based workforce, nor can they be expected to meet the financial demands of the subsequent increases in pay and conditions that are necessary for authentic unification within education and care. Significant government investment in the early learning sector, as a true integrated element of education and care for our children, is an absolute necessity. If quality is the true aim of the Australian policy context, then investment in all of the educators who work within centres is paramount.

The development and dissemination of the *National Quality Framework (NQF)* (COAG, 2009) as a quality raising initiative drew on international research on how best to improve children's life-long success. The problem now is that whilst this initiative is effective in terms of policy, it is not yet the reality at the centre level in Western Australia. When those teachers who are specifically qualified to work with very young children and have experienced practicum in this context opt to work elsewhere, policymakers and the Australian Government must consider the factors influencing teachers' decisions. Not only do implications arise for staffing across the sector, but significantly, implications regarding the enactment of policy and the 'actual versus intended' quality agenda are called

into question – and this is all to the detriment of children's experience and learning. Findings such as those reported in this paper clearly point to the need for policymakers and the Australian Government to look to international examples of education-care integration within early learning centres as a model for improvement. Supporting structures that work to reinforce the nature and purpose of qualified early childhood teachers in childcare, along with economic investment in these, will certainly be needed if the aim is a unified rather than fragmented early years context; one that raises quality by authentically integrating education and care within and across all early learning sectors.

Conclusion

The Australian Government's quality reforms within early childhood have been driven by international research that advocates the long term benefits for the individual and society at large when investment is given to the early years of children's development. A significant outcome of these quality reforms, the *NQS* (2009), outlines the requirement for each early learning centre to employ a degree qualified teacher, calling for a unified approach to the early years, that is, one that integrates education and care. This investigation of pre-service teachers' perspectives of teaching within the early learning centres has found that whilst integration of education and care has occurred at the policy level, and it has begun to be integrated at the tertiary level, there remains significant discontent within the sector. These feelings of discontent have resulted in resentment by current centre-based staff as teacher qualified graduates enter the sector. This inequity between teacher qualified educators and other staff has implications for all involved in the early childhood profession as they attempt to move forward as a community of educators with the shared goal of supporting the holistic education of Western Australia's youngest children.

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Appendix 1

Obtain Appendix 1 containing *Pre-service Teacher Survey Pre and Post Childcare Practicum Experience* and *Semi Structured Interview Questions* from <http://www.ier.org.au/ier31/robinson-appendix1.pdf> (about 78 kB)

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