

What you see is what you get? Early childhood educators' perceptions of professional status

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Abstract

A large body of literature has affirmed the importance of, and need for advocacy in raising the professional status of early childhood educators. Whilst various analysts have researched views of the professional status in Australia, little research has focussed on educators' perceptions of self, family, community and sector views of the professional status or the role of educators' advocacy in raising the professional status. This phenomenological study investigated participants' viewpoints of the role of educators in advocating for the professional status. Twelve educators working full-time in long-day-care settings across Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), Australia participated in the research. Findings revealed that participants perceived family and community perceptions of educators to be akin to the 'Mary Poppins' view (Stonehouse, 1989). Degree and diploma-trained participants, in contrast to directors, disassociated self-perceptions with political and business-related portrayals.

Keywords: early childhood, professional status, advocacy, long-day-care, community perceptions of early childhood

Introduction

Socio-historically, various analysts have acknowledged that educators in early childhood have enjoyed little prestige or status (Brennan, 2007; Covington Soul, 2005; Fenech, Sumsion & Shepherd, 2010). Status may be defined as the “teachers’ sense of self-esteem ascribed by students, parents, community members, peers, and superiors to the position of a teacher” (Short & Johnson, 1994, p. 582). Internationally, Covington Soul (2005) has suggested that (in Western contexts) an educator’s status increases incrementally with the age of the student. Congruently, previous research regarding the professional status in Australia has found that community views of early childhood teaching have been framed as “easy option(s) that focuses primarily on nappy changing and sand play” (Ashton & Elliott, 1995, Introduction, para. 2). In order to understand and contextualise the current professional status to the Australian landscape, a brief overview of historical influences is presented.

Socio-historical underpinnings

Historically, within the Australian context, Tayler (2000) has suggested that the low status of the profession has arisen as a by-product of the previous political fragmentation between early childhood ‘education’ and ‘care’ services. Brennan (2007) has suggested that this has led to ‘education’ services such as pre-schools being seen as those which prepare children for formal schooling, whilst ‘care’ services simply enable parental workforce participation (See for more details: Brennan, 1998, 2007; Elliott, 2007; Fenech et al., 2010; Goodfellow, 2007; Press, 2007; Press & Hayes, 2000; Sims, 1994; Sumsion, 2006; Tayler, 2000). Despite current initiatives (such as the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), National Quality Standards (NQS) and

the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (NPA ECE)) that aim to coalesce state-based initiatives into one national and consistent system (DEEWR, 2011); educators continue to operate across a variety of service types that employ both unqualified and qualified staff (Productivity Commission, 2011). This is significant as Elliott (2007) and Tayler (2000) have suggested that the fragmented diversity of staff qualifications and service types continue to influence negative perceptions of educators. Therefore, as the early childhood sector is hinged on the balance between education and welfare; investigations of advocacy and power are paramount in negating the “pedagogical silences” (Cheeseman, 2007, p. 244) prevalent within the sector.

Perceptions of professional status

In uncovering the rationale for the perceived low status of the profession, various analysts have suggested that community views of the profession have been influenced by a) the lack of community understanding regarding the role and function of play (Merino & Holmes, 2006; Warrilow & Fisher, 2002), b) (mis)conceptualisations of childhood as a period of frivolity (MacNaughton, 2003; Wong, 2007) and c) misrepresentations of educators in the media and popular fiction (Covington Soul, 2005; Hayden, 1994, 1996). This is exemplified by Hayden’s (1994) previous examinations of the role of media upon the professional status, which found that “childcare was either ignored or dealt with in a whimsical, misleading, or horrifying manner” (p. 14).

Significantly, little research regarding community viewpoints has been conducted in recent years. In 1996 Hayden researched 100 random respondents (that is,

community members entering and leaving a local shopping centre in Western Sydney) in order to elicit community perceptions of the early childhood profession. Hayden (1996) found that 80% of respondents did not believe educators in long-day-care settings were 'professionals', whilst 68% replied that educators in long-day-care settings did not need specialist training or qualifications in order to work with children. Whilst this research is significant in that it clearly highlighted community perceptions of what early childhood educators are *not*, it did not question the community as to what participants perceived being an educator entailed.

Importantly, alternate literature has acknowledged that understandings of the profession are not homogenous. Research has shown that internal stakeholders' (children, families, colleagues) perceptions of professional status varies from those of external stakeholders (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2008; Rolfe & Richards, 1993). The scarcity of empirical understandings framing potential changes in stakeholders' perceptions of professional status across various contexts necessitates inquiry.

Moreover, various researchers have mentioned the relationships between professional status and current pay and working conditions, rates of attrition, burnout and professional dissatisfaction experienced by the early childhood sector (Elliott, 2006; Press, 2007; Warrilow & Fisher, 2002). Contextualising the current professional status against the backdrop of community perceptions is paramount as research has found that community perceptions significantly influence educators choice to teach (Ashton & Elliott, 1995) or more pertinently, not to teach (Smulyan, 2004). Moreover, Hard (2005) has suggested that educators' internalise community perceptions and expectations of the self as a professional and subsequently project these expectations

through their professional endeavours.

Whilst these findings, amongst a plethora of others, render investigations of educators' advocacy and power vital to initiating changes to professional status, educators' viewpoints in the media, (Hayden, 1997a) and community at large (Smulyan, 2004) have received little attention (Covington Soul, 2005). This article therefore reports on research, which sought to ascertain educators' perceptions of advocacy and power in raising the professional status with multiple stakeholders in diverse contexts. The broad research question sought to examine educators' perceptions of advocacy and power in raising the professional status with multiple stakeholders in diverse contexts. Accordingly, three sub-questions were utilised:

1. What are educators' understandings of advocacy in multiple contexts with diverse stakeholders?
2. What are educators' perceptions of power in various contexts with diverse stakeholders?
3. What are educators' self-perceptions of the professional status and how do they perceive themselves to be viewed by internal and external stakeholders in various contexts?

For the purpose of this article, the focus will remain primarily on the third question, such that critical considerations and overviews of educators' perceptions of the professional status in raising the professional status are elucidated. However, as there was significant crossover in the concepts examined through the research, some overlap in this paper will be present.

Methodology

As there is a current paucity of educators' viewpoints prevalent in educational research (Covington Soul, 2005; Hayden, 1997), the current study utilised a phenomenological approach to elicit understandings of the professional status, as it is experienced and perceived by participants themselves (Moustakas, 1994). As the majority of early childhood literature surrounding advocacy has focused on educators or children in traditional school contexts (Berry, 1995; Covington Soul, 2005; Smulyan, 2004), the current study sought to elicit and contextualise the viewpoints of educators in long-day-care settings. The study aimed to recruit three groups of; four diploma trained educators (one or two year trained), four degree trained educators (three or four year trained) and four directors (three or four year trained or equivalent) employed full-time in long-day-care settings responsible for children between the ages of 0-5 years. These three groups of practitioners were purposefully selected, in order to account for the staffing variability in long-day-care settings and to ensure that educators employed for different positions within settings could offer their perspectives. An overview of research participants is framed in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

| Participant | Age | Background | Position | Years of Experience |
|-------------|-----|---------------------|----------|---------------------|
| 1 | 28 | Greek-Australian | Director | 7 |
| 2 | 55 | Italian-Argentinean | Director | 22 |
| 3 | 59 | Anglo-Australian | Director | 25 |
| 4 | 63 | Australian | Director | 30 |
| 5 | 31 | Anglo-Australian | Degree | 9 |
| 6 | 26 | Anglo-Australian | Degree | 4 |
| 7 | 36 | Anglo-Australian | Degree | 20 |
| 8 | 24 | Indian | Degree | 4 |
| 9 | 22 | Anglo-Australian | Diploma | 2 |
| 10 | 20 | Australian | Diploma | <1 |
| 11 | 22 | Anglo-Australian | Diploma | 5 |
| 12 | 23 | Anglo-Australian | Diploma | 6 |

As the current study was completed as part of an honours program, ethical approval was attained from Macquarie University¹. Additionally, layers of both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to triangulate multiple insights into educators' perceptions (McMillan, 2004). Accordingly, the current study collected data via two in-depth interviews, artefacts and a participant-completed advocacy mosaic (See Mevawalla & Hadley, in preparation) that was developed by the author for the purpose of the research.

Sampling and recruitment

As this research sought to elicit in-depth understandings of educators' lived experiences and perceptions, purposeful sampling was used to gain access to information rich participants. Indirect snowball sampling was used to recruit twelve educators working full-time in long-day-care centres across Sydney, NSW. Participants were recruited through an indirect snowballing technique whereby the researcher sent "Invitations to Participate" and "Information and Consent" forms to colleagues that were not eligible to partake in the study. Colleagues passed on notifications of the study to potential participants who then self-selected their involvement in the study. Therefore, the researcher in the present study was not immediately connected to any participants, which significantly reduced the possibility of participant and researcher contamination (McMillan, 2004).

Measures and instruments

Two in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted to extend "beyond the

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subjective experience of individuals to describe underlying structures or essences in that experience” (Sharkey, 2001, p. 19). The initial interview collected demographic information, professional history, career aspirations, participant rationales for entering the profession and perceptions of professional status. The second interview investigated educators’ perceptions of raising the professional status via the utilisation of advocacy, power and leadership within macro-contexts.

In order to elicit participants’ perceptions of the professional status, interviews asked participants to first freely identify and describe their images of the profession. Participants were further prompted to describe if/how ‘images’ had changed over time. Subsequent to this, participants were presented with 5 images devised by Stonehouse in 1989. Stonehouse (1989) presented views of educators as; “Mary Poppins” (p.62), “Old Fashioned, Motherly, Stern, but Loving Teachers” (p.63), “Political Early Childhood Persons” (p.64), “Early Childhood Business Persons” (p.65) or “Robots” (p.66). These images were used as stimuli to elicit participants’ association with or against these portrayals. These images were further used to elicit responses from participants regarding the professional status.

Moustakas (1994) has specified that the contexts within which experiences occur are as significant in shaping participants’ perceptions of the event as the phenomena itself. As such, to increase the internal validity of the research, artefacts such as professional development records, workplace policies and job descriptions were collected. Additionally, a numerical layer of data was collected through participants’ completion of an advocacy mosaic. The mosaic was a graphical tally chart that recorded the frequency, range and type of advocacy actions participants completed over a week. Participants were asked to tally interactions with children, families,

colleagues, the community and also the self as a professional. This enabled participants to map experiences as they occurred. However as this data did not relate to participants' perceptions and experiences of the professional status, this data is not presented in detail in this paper.

Data Analysis

The present study organised, analysed and interpreted data from interviews, artefacts and mosaics from various angles (Opie, 2004) to derive meanings of advocacy, power and the professional status. QSR NVivo Version 8 software was utilised to inductively analyse themes surfacing from the interviews and artefacts. Bazeley (2007) has suggested that displaying data graphically through software such as QSR NVivo can increase the internal validity of research, as researchers are able to organise data in ways that perpetuate the consistency of categorisations. Once the multiple forms of data had been coded in broader themes, overall descriptions of centrally emerging phenomena were constructed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Demographic data concerning participants' age, qualifications and experiences were further utilised during data analysis to discern similarities and differences between directors, degree and diploma-trained participants' perceptions of the professional status.

Results

This study found that participants' self-perceptions and interconnections to Stonehouse's (1989) images were diverse. Degree and diploma trained participants disassociated with the political early childhood person and the early childhood businessperson, whereas directors disassociated with the Mary Poppins view.

Participants hypothesised that external community stakeholders associated long-day-care settings with “child-minding” services. Participants associated this perception to a lack of general knowledge about the importance, role and function of early childhood education. Alternately, participants perceived internal stakeholders perceptions of the profession to evolve as stakeholders became increasingly aware of the importance of early childhood education. Conversely, findings suggest that participants’ self-perceptions of the profession were divergent and intertwined with their roles, positions and past experiences. Participants also noted the importance of intrinsically raising the professional status through pride in the self as a professional.

External stakeholders’ perceptions

All twelve participants perceived that external community stakeholders without direct contact or experience with early childhood settings aligned long-day-care to “babysitting” or “child-minding” services. Eight participants’ own perceptions of early childhood education prior to entering the profession denoted teaching in early childhood as “*a nine to three job*” (Participant 5) where participants “*thought it was playing around with all the kids*” (Participant 9). Accordingly, one participant highlighted that there is “*quite a misconception about what we do*” (Participant 7).

These perceived misconceptions of external stakeholders regarding the roles and functions performed by educators were further highlighted by participants’ responses to Stonehouse’s (1989) images. The images provided a visual stimulus and enabled participants to dissect community and self-perceptions of the profession. Participants were asked to identify which of these images they believed the community perceived to be the most accurate of educators. Participants were further asked if they perceived

these images to be specific to the long-day-care sector or if they generalised these images to the teaching profession as a whole.

Figure 1. *The Mary Poppins view* (Stonehouse, 1989)



Eleven out of twelve participants indicated that they believed the community perceived the “Mary Poppins” view to be the most accurate. Seven participants indicated that the lack of general community knowledge regarding play-based learning and the role of educators contributed to this view:

The Mary Poppins view is something that they see educators as just one’s that care for little babies and sing songs and stuff like that... they don’t have the education to know that what that’s doing to help the children, so I mean, in a sense, we do “frolic happily with the children” but meanwhile we’re developing their gross motor skills and their co-ordination and... developing literacy skills... They don’t see the depth that’s involved in all of these activities that we do.

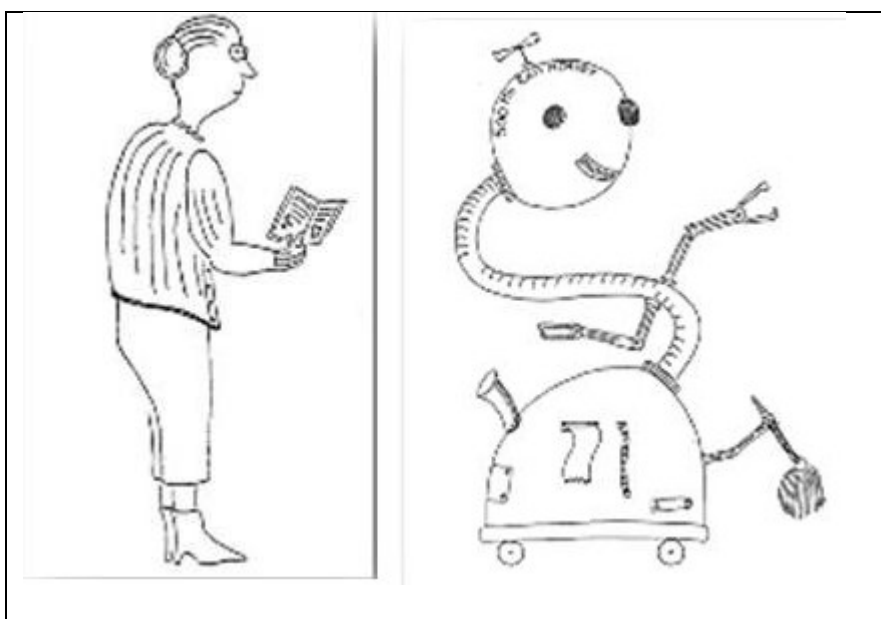
(Participant 11)

Whilst participants perceived external stakeholders to view educators as “nice ladies who love children” (Stonehouse, 1989, p.78), they did observe that internal stakeholders views of the profession were distinct from those of external stakeholders.

Internal stakeholders' perceptions

Eleven of the twelve participants suggested that the professional status of educators evolved as internal stakeholders, such as families, became increasingly aware of the functions and roles of educators in long-day-care settings. Whilst participants perceived internal stakeholders views of the profession to evolve, nine participants noted the importance of educating families about the importance of early childhood education in order to enhance views of the profession. Correspondingly, data from the mosaic indicated that participants' use of expert knowledge to assist families and participants' articulation of their role, as educators were the most frequently completed self-advocacy actions involving families. Participants suggested that as families' interactions within settings increased, families overlapped the "Mary Poppins" view with the "Old-fashioned, motherly, stern but loving teacher" view and the "Robot" view:

Figure 2. The "teacher" and "robot" views (Stonehouse, 1989)



Self-perceptions

Participants' perceptions of educators and the self as a professional were characteristically polarised. Five participants perceived the professional status to be polarised due to the diversity and multitude of educators' experiences, lifestyles and knowledge of early childhood:

"I think there are two extremes, because being in the situation that I'm in. I mean I do have meetings with people who are quite high up in the profession and they definitely hold it in high esteem, because they're within the profession and they're quite educated within that and experienced. But then you get people outside the profession or even colleagues who might... [Not] see the magnitude of what they're doing, they just see it as an eight hour shift"

(Participant 7)

Additionally, three participants coupled this polarity to the level of education and training received by educators within the profession. Thematic analysis further demonstrated the positional polarities prevalent within early childhood settings as four degree and diploma-trained participants intertwined self-perceptions with the Mary Poppins view, whilst directors' self-perceptions were more closely related to the old-fashioned, motherly, stern but loving teacher, the early childhood business-person and the Robot. Only one director related to the political early childhood person, who Stonehouse (1989) defined as "an effective and persistent fighter, a forceful lobbyist, and an articulate speaker" (p.64).

In advocating for the professional status, participants predominantly perceived that power to make changes at the macro level was required to filter down.

Conversely, eight participants also suggested that the reputation of educators could be

ameliorated “from the ground-up” (Participant 7) through educators advocating to internal stakeholders (such as families) and these stakeholders in turn filtering awareness outwards/upwards through the community.

Four participants congruently noted that the enhancement of the professional status comes with “being proud of what you do” (Participant 10). Participants suggested intrinsically raising the professional status by first respecting the self as a professional and subsequently modelling professionalism for colleagues and families within the setting.

Discussion

Akin to Hayden (1996), this study found that participants perceived external stakeholders to equate educators in long-day-care settings to child minders. Surprisingly, prior to entering the profession, participants themselves predominantly viewed early childhood teaching to be “*the easy option*” (participant 8). This may have significant implications on educators’ choices of teaching as a vocation and possibly upon the high rates of attrition (Warrilow & Fisher, 2002). In accordance with previous researchers’ conjectures, perhaps individuals capable of being exceptional teachers choose prestigious occupations over teaching due to such pervading perceptions (Richardson & Watt, 2006; Smulyan, 2004; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Or perhaps the high rates of attrition are related to the disparities in educators’ perceptions of teaching prior to and after commencement in early childhood settings.

Significantly, as there appeared to be noteworthy polarities in educators’ self-perceptions, it calls into question the extent to which community perceptions influence perceptions of the self as a professional. Interestingly, as the diploma and

degree-trained teachers aligned self- and community perceptions more closely with the “Mary Poppins” view, it could be inferred that the polarity in self-perceptions exists as a positional property. Alternately, whilst directors perceived “Mary Poppins” to be the pervading community viewpoint of educators, directors themselves did not associate the self as a professional with this imagery. Notably, as the directors that participated in this study were significantly older than the degree and diploma counterparts, in accordance with Rodd’s (2006) findings, it could be inferred that younger participants are more likely to adhere to (and self-project) community views than older participants.

Consistent with prior research, the current study found that participants perceived parental perceptions of long-day-care settings to improve as engagements within the setting increased (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2008; Rolfe & Richards, 1993). Potentially, as participants highlighted the importance of educating parents about the significance of early childhood, it can be inferred that whilst participants were reluctant to engage in advocacy actions to raise the professional status in external spheres, that educators’ perceive that they are able to raise the professional status through covert engagements within the centre. Perhaps, as Duncan (1996) has suggested, educators felt more comfortable completing these ‘covert’ actions, as they enabled educators to advocate for the professional status whilst still maintaining congruence with community images of educators as selfless and caring “nice ladies who love children” (Stonehouse, 1989, p.61). Various writers have questioned this preference for passive advocacy, by noting that such mechanisms do not engender the capacity for educators to speak for themselves in raising the professional status (Fenech et al., 2010; Sachs, 2000; Sumsion, 2006).

Uniquely, the current research findings revealed that participants perceived the professional status to be indirectly raised through families advocating for early childhood in wider community contexts. Akin to previous research, a possible inference may be that participants did not identify their roles and responsibilities as educators to encompass advocacy functions (Hayden, 1997; Nupponen, 2006; Rodd, 2006). Despite Fenech, et al's (2010) suggestion that the 'Political Early Childhood Person' is "the most useful way forward for early childhood teachers" (p.92), this study found that educators were least likely to associate with Stonehouse's (1989) 'Political Early Childhood Person', or to engage in advocacy actions outside of the workplace (Mevawalla & Hadley, in preparation). Potentially, the lack of collective avenues for advocacy outside of the workplace may influence the current lack of educators' viewpoints in the media and wider community. However, as Fenech, et al (2010), Osgood (2006), Sachs (1997, 2000, 2001) and Sumsion (2006) have detailed, educators themselves must act pro-actively together to raise the professional status of the sector.

Limitations

McMillan (2004) has described that generalisability of qualitative studies are problematic due to the inductive nature of researching phenomena. It is acknowledged here that the small sample size in this study renders the sample non-representative of the general populus; however, this method was appropriate for the present study as the aim was to accrue qualitative detail of educators' perspectives and experiences. Moreover, although the current research was conducted within NSW, as a variety of early childhood initiatives, policies and regulations are now unified

(Productivity Commission, 2011); the research implications can be relevant to long-day-care settings across Australia.

Additionally, as this research was conducted in partial completion of an honours degree, limitations of the present research included the paucity of time, resources and experience of the researcher. The possibility of researcher bias was a paramount consideration (Opie, 2004). To negate this, the researcher engaged in the processes of bracketing to suspend any “preconceived notions or personal experiences that may unduly influence what the researcher hears the participant saying” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 139). Additionally, as the study was conducted within a limited frame of time and resources, to ensure maximum variation in sampling, no more than one participant per setting was recruited.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The current study hopes to act as a catalyst for informing the future research initiatives surrounding advocacy and power in raising the professional status. A worthwhile approach for future research would be to recruit a larger sample size, as well as include other stakeholders involved in both ‘education’ and ‘care’ based settings. By investigating multiple viewpoints of unqualified staff, family members, community members, governments, early childhood organisations, employers and unions, which are scarcely reported, these perspectives could be unpacked.

A pertinent recommendation for practice is that educators use the media, lobbying and researching methods (Bown, 2009) in order to raise the professional capacity for raising the professional status. At the same time, it is suggested that tertiary institutions educate prospective educators about the process and importance

of advocacy in raising the professional status. This may further involve institutions characterising advocacy as functions and roles completed by educators themselves. It is further suggested that educators utilise inter-governmental entities or peak organisations to collectively enable educators to “take a leadership role in reclaiming the agenda for professionalism” (Sachs, 1997, p. 264).

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