Communities of Practice: Innovation in Early Childhood Education and Care Teacher and Practitioner Preparation

Karen Noble
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Abstract: In early childhood education and care (ECEC), research indicates that quality experiences for young children are a result of the partnership between committed professionals who facilitate collaborative high quality programs. Furthermore, it is clear that practice within the ECEC sector has become more complex. Indeed, practitioners in this field are now required to heavily focus upon the care and welfare components of their practice because context issues are impacting on their work with young children. As such, practitioners are often required to deal with issues that could be considered to be outside of the realm of traditional educational training. Such issues are impacting on teachers and practitioners in relation to how they see themselves as professionals in the workplace. This situation can be troubling and problematic, as practitioners seek to negotiate the complexities of engaging in practice across social and disciplinary boundaries. This paper explores an innovative approach to preparing students for such complex work, by way of the development of a community of practice, in which students, supervisors and university academic staff engage in a collaborative process of critical reflection to interrogate practice and to make connections to relevant theoretical frameworks that draw on a multidisciplinary approach.

Keywords: Critical Reflection, Practicum, Beginning Teachers and Practitioners, Community of Practice

Introduction

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector throughout Australia is fragmented, with wide state variation in how ECEC programs are delivered, organised, staffed and funded. Compounding this fragmentation is the issue of availability of places for young children and their families (Bowes & Hayes, 1999; Brennan, 1998; 1999; Noble, 2003; 2005). Throughout this paper, the term ECEC is used to denote formal centre-based early childhood services that provide education and care for young children from zero to eight years of age, including childcare, kindergarten, preschool, preparatory and early primary years in Australia. This definition is supported internationally, evidenced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, Starting Strong, (2001), where ECEC is used to describe services such as early primary years, preschool, kindergarten and child care.

The possible reframing of the public provision of such services for young children is receiving much attention by both the state and national levels of governments in Australia (Commonwealth Government, 1999; 2002; 2003; 2004; Council of Australian Government (COAG) Child Care Working Group, 1995; Queensland Government, 2000; 2005). The promotion of the need for systemic reform and the development of more flexible and integrated services are also evident in the international arena (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2001). Such reform directly impacts upon the professionals and practitioners working within these services. Indeed, whilst much has been written about the tensions that exist in Australian ECEC policy and practice (Fleer, 2000; OECD, 2001; Press & Hayes, 2000), there is a further need to examine closely the knowledge base and practices of ECEC, in order to reflect upon the appropriateness of practitioner preparation. Such endeavours provide an approach to structures and practices that allow for ECEC reform, practitioner preparedness and sustainable, workforce capacity building. Coupled with this, is the need to constantly evaluate university practitioner preparation programs, in order that they continue to provide students with the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities vital for their effective transition into their chosen areas of professional practice. In times of uncertain futures and dramatic policy reform, there are many perceived challenges to the preparedness of students choosing a career working with young children and families across disparate ECEC contexts. Moreover, this paper explores the need for critical reflection due to the disjuncture between the realities of the ECEC practitioner in the field of practice and the need to develop a cohesive “community of practice”, with an aspiration of promoting a more cohesive and internally supportive workforce. Specifically, this paper highlights the ways in which this term is identified, characterised, and practiced, particularly during times of political, social and economic fragmentation for those undergraduate university students preparing to enter the ECEC community.
Contextual Considerations for ECEC Practitioner Preparation

Within existing literature relating to ECEC practitioner preparation, several important contexts are identified that impact upon the ways in which their education and training affect their practice and future professional development (Cavanagh, 2002; Cliff, 1996). These contexts include the theoretical context, the professional and community context, as well as the personal context. The common, identifiable elements amongst each of these contexts are those of learning and reflective practice.

The theoretical context, in this instance, refers to the knowledge base that students must acquire, in order to inform and guide their practices with young children and their families. Such a theoretical context needs to inform practitioner practice, whilst at the same time, growing and improving over time, with experience and in response to future reform within the sector. This theoretical context also guides the individual’s development in both their professional and personal contexts. It is recognised that there are inherent difficulties in translating such theory into practice. Indeed, this is an ethical dilemma that many in the field of higher education, as well as ECEC have highlighted (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Fleer, 2000; Moss, 2003; Moss & Petrie, 2002). In response to such dilemmas, an important part of the student’s education and training is to facilitate the development of skills in critical reflection. Whilst there is a body of theory on philosophical and ethical standpoints, dilemmas and perspectives, the body of theory about the learning of these reflective skills is less developed. The concept of community has become a catch phrase within the wider societal context. Within this terrain, community is a concept with high ethical content. Community is an easy label to apply, and in recent times, particularly in the education and care sectors, this has been done with regularity (O’Farrell, 2005; Queensland Government, 2002).

The idea of community has connotations of collectivism, rather than fragmented individualism. Alternatively, the concept of community can be seen as transitory, that is, constantly shifting and changing, rather than a stable entity. The dilemma is centred within the notion of community for graduate students who are preparing to participate in the ECEC community sector, working with young children and their families, as reflective practitioners. Particularly, how they see themselves transitioning from a student to a professional practitioner.

In recent times, the term “community” has been used widely, particularly in social policy. Indeed, community now appears as a prefix to many government programs and policy reforms. In this sense, the term is used to evoke a sense of togetherness, referring to the notion of holding something in common, an example being community interests, or a sense of common identity. Community is not a static phenomenon. People make continuous choices about their communal identification and the degree of their affiliation. Therefore, students need to be provided opportunities, knowledge and skills to be able to engage in the cycle of learning and reflection, in order to establish, evaluate and maintain membership of the ECEC community.

How then, do students understand their acquisition of membership to the ECEC community of professional practitioners? How do they acquire the identity of, and sense of belonging to, the ECEC community? Collaboration and partnership are some of the well-established conceptions within the literature in relation to ECEC communities. Indeed, interpersonal and group skills, as well as “groupness” are claimed as essential features of ECEC communities (Goodfellow, 1995; Walsh et al., 2002). The building of partnerships is a key component of effective curriculum practice and community development (Woodrow & Brennan, 1999). In ECEC, these partnerships are essential for the development of ECEC programs which lead to improved outcomes for young children and their families. The development and maintenance of such partnerships, or ECEC communities, is not a prescriptive process, and as such, the future practitioner, i.e. the ECEC student, must emerge from their education program with the capacity to engage in teamwork, to collaborate in curriculum decision-making and to have the ability to develop critical reflective practices. Another important element of the professional context of ECEC practitioner preparation is the way in which the ECEC practitioner is viewed, particularly from within their own community. If we are to examine the notion of community in terms of ‘common identity’, as previously mentioned, then issues such as professional status and standing, working conditions, training and qualifications need to be discussed and reflected upon also. These issues lead to disparity within the sector, further complicating practices within the field and complicating the way in which the practitioner reflects upon practices as well as personal identity as an effective practitioner.

Within the personal context, the notion of community is seen as a state of mind, rather than something tangible. It is more than a place. It is an acknowledgement of involvement, engagement as well as interdependence. There is an acceptance that despite community being a social concept, it is utterly dependent on the individual person. It is not sameness, but interlocking diversity and respect for specialisation and individual difference. It’s unity is that of diversity in which an arena of action is created. Therefore, “community is never static, always negotiated, shifting and adjusting its principles of order,
but always mine and ours, mine to belong to, ours
to be ourselves” (O’Farrell, 1994, p.18). For one to
develop a sense of belonging to the community of
ECEC practitioners, one needs to develop personally
and professionally.

**Focusing on Reflective Practice**

Scholarship in the field of ECEC has often been un-
derpinned by a focus on reflective practice as a
means of evaluating and assessing and improving
appropriate practice for work with young children
(Moss, 2000; 2003; Moss & Pence, 1994; National
Child Care Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2002;
Noble, 2003; Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2004;
Perry, 1997) and making connections between theory
and practice. As such, the ability to reflect on practice
has traditionally been a way for student practitioners
to evaluate their own practice and the practice of
others, with a view to developing effective skills,
abilities and knowledge to inform their future prac-
tice with young children and families (Fleer, 2000;
Goodfellow, 1995; MacNaughton & Williams, 1998;
NCAC, 2002; Patterson & Sumsion, 1996; Perry,
1997; Sumsion, 2003). Reflection on practice there-
fore is a necessary component of tertiary practitioner
preparation programs, as it is the means by which
improvement in practice, maintaining professional-
ism and professional development is promoted when
these graduates move into the field.

In the field of ECEC, reflective practice is a “core
activity” (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.145), understood
as the ability to evaluate critical incidents within
daily work, using this evaluation as a means of im-
proving practice and knowledge about work with
young children. The reflective practitioner is one
who provides space for “new possibilities to be ex-
This practitioner engages in this space to construct,
rather than reproduce knowledge. To reflect effect-
ively, practitioners must not see themselves as the
“repository of objects of knowledge” (Moss & Petrie,
2002, p.145), but rather, must engage in a process
that allows them to construct new epistemological
understandings that are informed by theory, research
and practice. To engage in small group discussion
and reflection where each member is at a similar
level of professional development may prove fruit-
less, in that only a narrow or limited knowledge base
can be drawn upon. Instead, participation of practi-
tioners of various levels of experience may actually
be more useful in providing an examination of the
multiplicity of responses that may be applicable to
given any situation.

**Building Towards Critically Reflective
Practitioners**

Romantic notions of idealistic approaches to working
with young children have often guided reflection on
practice (Sumsion, 2003) across the various ECEC
contexts. Such romantic notions do not withstand
the complexity, uncertainty and insecurity of working
with young children and their families in the current
context (Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Jenks, 1996a,
1996b). The process of reflective practice promotes
a culture of evaluation, whereby all practitioners
become involved in processes that assist them to
constantly review what is happening and what should
be happening within a community of practice. Ac-
cording to Wadsworth (1997) such reflection can be
built into the everyday activities of practitioners
through a variety of means including daily informal
self- reflection, as well as through more formalised
processes. It can be ascertained that there is a differ-
ence between reflective practice and critical reflec-
tion, and that this difference exists in the ability of
the practitioner to engage with multiple understand-
ings of practice. Critical reflection is understood to
be the ability to reflect honestly on one’s practice in
a manner that allows multiple perspectives and ap-
proaches to inform the work that is done. Sumsion
(2003) understands critical reflection as a discursive
project using Phelan’s argument, which contests that
preservice teachers and practitioners should “be ex-
posed to a wider range of discourses than are tradi-
tionally sanctioned by teacher education programs”
(Sumsion, 2003, p.83). Furthermore, Phelan states
[practitioner] education needs to become a discursive
project. There is no escaping discourse. There is no
escaping that language/discourse constitutes experi-
ence generally, and our experience of place specif-
cally. [Practitioner] educators may need to consider
how we can help prospective practitioners to recog-
nize the multiple discourses that shape and often re-
strict their thinking about experience and place (cited

It is important that participants are accepted for
their contribution and recognition is given to the tacit
knowledge (Osmond, 2001) that each person already
possesses, while at the same time developing the
ability to incorporate multiple understandings and
perspectives that are presented by others.

**Learning Circles: Promoting Critical
Reflection as a Means of Building a
Community of Practice**

One approach to promoting the adoption of multiple
understandings and developing skills of critical re-
fection is based on the learning circle approach that,
in this instance, maximises opportunities for small
groups of students to critically reflect upon practice
in the field alongside more experienced practitioners and university academic staff. Learning circles are self-managed learning groups, built on the fundamental principles of adult learning. The best adult learning encourages and supports the critical reflection on what we think we already know (Sumsion, 2003). In this way, learning circles have proven a practical and effective method of learning and supporting change. They are a way for students to form new understandings with regard to important issues, in their own time (Karasi & Segar, 2000). The learning circle approach has been a predominate part of adult education, especially in Scandinavia (Crombie, 1999). Such an approach is understood as democracy in action, as it encourages all views to be expressed and explores various merits. An effective learning circle can empower its members to act as they see fit, on the basis of the new knowledge that this process generates.

Such a process to critical reflection further enhances the learning outcomes achieved through practice and enables the development of generic skills necessary to work across many different ECEC contexts. Learning circles present the opportunity for self-directed learning, with learning occurring through shared inquiry and dialogue (Karasi & Segar, 2000), providing all participants with an opportunity to ‘think otherwise’ (Foucault, 1984; McWilliam, 2002) about how their work with young children and families might ‘play out in the real’. A learning circle approach to deconstructing practice in ECEC accentuates the dialogic relationship necessary to the development of the skills of effective critical reflection in students, practitioners and academics alike. This paper argues that critical reflection differs from mere reflective ability by highlighting reflexivity as an essential component of such skills and by understanding professional or social practice as a discursive project (Phelan, cited in Sumsion, 2003).

The learning circle approach allows opportunities to draw on the experiences and knowledge of all participants, thereby allowing the beginning practitioner, or student, more time to extend learning and follow up with information searches in their own time that will extend from the in-depth and rich discussion, thereby deepening the learning that is occurring for each individual. As previously outlined, although simplification is an important aspect of the learning circle process, the dialogic relationship that this approach promotes enables the facilitator to move students and experienced practitioners beyond a surface level exploration of experiential learning, encouraging them to become knowledge seekers in the process, regardless of their level of expertise. This self-direction occurs through the equal relationship that is established early in the process that can often not be a part of a traditional student-practitioner learning situation (Haigh & Ward, 2004).

The learning circle approach provides an opportunity to produce practitioners who are problem-solvers, decision-makers, communicators, critical thinkers who have awareness of effective interpersonal skills and group facilitation processes and value the role of lifelong learning in their professional growth and development. Moreover, the notion of a community of practice is integral to the use of learning circles. Thus, by drawing on established knowledge and experience from all participants, the learning circle approach facilitates collaboration within the community and enhances student understanding of the importance of such community work. It is therefore evident that multiple perspectives are likely to be present, as all participants have different knowledge, experience and understandings that they possess and impart to other members of the group.

Conclusion

As has been previously articulated, the preparation of beginning practitioners to work effectively in the early childhood education and care sector is of particular relevance in times of dramatic policy reform (Fleer, 2000; Noble, 2003; Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2004). Preparatory ECEC programs need to reflect these changes and ensure that programs that are offered do indeed meet the ever-changing needs of the students that enrol, providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills that are transferable across this broad community sector. This paper postulates that the effective, professional ECEC practitioner requires the ability to reflect, and learn from this reflection. Therefore, an important part of the training and education of ECEC practitioners needs to focus on facilitating the development of skills in critical reflection.

References


**About the Author**

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Dr Karen Noble brings significant expertise to early childhood education and care, with 17 years experience in the fields of education, child development and human services. During this time she has worked in various practice settings, including childcare, preschool, early primary years and tertiary settings. Karen has undertaken a variety of research across this sector. Some of Dr Noble's most recent research focuses on parental choice of early years services. Additionally, she has published significantly in the areas of child and youth welfare and educational innovation. Aspects of Dr Noble's research have been presented to prestigious research meetings in Australia, New Zealand, Scotland and Cuba. Her work is also being published in the academic and professional literature and stands to make a contribution to policy and practice in the early years.
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