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Skills shortages and industry renewal: rethinking work and occupational knowledge when recognising prior learning¹

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Abstract

Credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL) are related policy strategies that aim to improve pathways to learning and employment. This paper describes a higher education RPL initiative to build rich understandings of 'work' and so also the occupational knowledge accumulated by practitioners, sometimes over many decades. Located in the early childhood education (ECE) field, the study was prompted by recent policy changes to meet quality assurance requirements of early childhood provision. The initiative used a multidisciplinary approach to occupational knowledge drawing on feminist sociology, professional and work-related learning and early childhood theories of provision. A higher education 'foundation course' was used to identify and accredit prior learning. Data were collected from students undertaking the course. In brief findings indicate participants had accumulated extensive occupational knowledge but were often unable to articulate this experience in relation to formal learning outcomes or broader notions of ECE occupational knowledge and they experienced substantial challenges to their occupational identities as they shifted between being competent professionals and university learners. The findings have implications for contemporary workforces as occupational knowledge requirements are continuously upgraded and older workers are encouraged to remain in the workforce.

Introduction: recent restructuring and change in early childhood education

There is overwhelming evidence that the early years are critical to children's long term health, behaviour and capacity to learn (McCain, Mustard and Shankar, 2007). It is now well recognised that preschool attendance for 4 year olds is critical to their long term success at school. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project in the UK (see <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/index.htm> for details of the project and associated publications) showed significant positive long term effects on children's academic progress at school if they attended preschool. Australian reports have followed this lead, arguing that 'Universal provision of the State-funded preschool education program for all children is a desired outcome' (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2005, p. 186). Moreover recent Australian Commonwealth Government policy has initiated an early childhood policy agenda which is restructuring almost every aspect of early childhood education (hereafter ECE) in this country including curriculum, accreditation, licensing, and integration with community and social work and health services. One area of focus for this reform is the universal provision of education for 4 year olds, and includes improvement in the qualifications required for teaching 4 year olds.

ECE teacher capacity is critical to the achievement of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) early childhood policy goals as outlined in the National Quality

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Framework for Early Childhood Education and Child Care (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). To quote the OECD *Starting Strong 2* report with respect to Australia, 'The National Agenda highlights the need for the development of a skilled and knowledgeable workforce as a key consideration for ensuring an effective and sustainable early childhood system' (2006, p. 273). Tayler, Wills, Hayden and Wilson (2006, p. 59) further develop this link, arguing that '[q]ualifications and training of staff are key indicators of the quality outcomes for children in ECEC programs, assessed using measures across the developmental spectrum (emotional, social, cognitive, language and physical)'. Their findings are consistent with those of other studies including a meta-analysis conducted by Kelley and Camilli (2007) that found more positive outcomes for children in early childhood classes when the teacher was degree qualified – a finding also supported by the Effective Preschool and Primary Project (EPPE study) (Sylva 2010, p. 224). Moreover, Siraj-Blatchford, et al. (2003, np) have also observed that when qualified teachers are working in a program, they have a positive influence on the quality of care delivered by other staff.

In response to a range of policy and workforce demands COAG stipulated that teachers of 4 year olds should have a four year early childhood degree qualification. The national Productivity Commission Draft Report recommended that during the resulting transition period, existing staff with 3 year qualifications would have the option to remain teaching while those entering or returning to the profession would be required to upgrade to a 4 year qualification (Productivity Commission Draft Report 2011, p. XL). Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Child Development (hereafter called DECD) adopted a broader ECE workforce development perspective and offered currently employed kindergarten teachers the opportunity to upgrade: in other words, the upgrade extended *beyond* a requirement for those entering the field or seeking to re-register as teachers. Furthermore, DECD offered generous scholarships – university fees, accommodation, travel, study time allowances – to teachers who chose the pathway.

Background to the study

The Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Inservice) program (hereafter referred to by its institutional code MBIE), was a modified version of a one year full time program, available since 1995 and generally taken part time by employed educators seeking four year or early childhood qualified status. Five imperatives shaped our tailored version of the program:

1. The need to recognise and address a 'gap' between three and four year qualifications at the same time as we recognised that focussing on the qualifications gap alone might skew thinking towards accumulation of learning rather than a 'shift' in understanding ECE practice. A substantial body of literature supports the argument that early childhood, and hence early years learning, requires specialised knowledge. This point is well summarised by Mantovani (2008, p. 115):

early childhood is ... the period of life where the underlying assumptions related to the processes and the experience of growing, interacting, learning, being taken care of, and being educated can be observed at their origins; within the family and in other educational contexts less formalised than school and other instructional settings.

An additional year of study would not necessarily have the desired impact of improving the quality of teaching.

2. Professional development was a required component of ECE industrial agreements. However, in consultations with ECE colleagues noticeable patterns of professional development began to emerge with a distinct tendency towards short term non-assessable workshops that had limited articulation toward higher education

qualifications. These patterns restricted the scope and capacity of professional development as a vehicle for career advancement.

3. DECD had nominated two priority areas of professional expertise: working with Aboriginal children and families and building upon the Department's existing priority that teachers become better informed about early brain development. These two areas were prominent in the program content and consistent with Productivity Commission recommendations (2011, page L) and recent recommendations that 'universities should establish education programs for staff working in early childhood development in order to ensure that they have a common knowledge base about experience based brain development that is relevant to their work' (Mustard 2008 p. 22).
4. Professional development and career challenges facing educators working in rural and remote areas were additional priority concerns. DECD prioritised scholarships for rural and remote teachers, a decision also consistent with Productivity Commission recommendations to deliver more training in rural and remote locations (p. XL111), and make 'study more attractive to a wider pool of graduates' (p. XL1V).

One key adaption of MBIE was the inclusion of a 'foundation course' (hereafter called EDUC 5138). This course expanded the scope of ECE professional learning to include literature about lifelong learning, workplace learning and on-the-job learning and ECE workforce development. Specifically EDUC 5138 aimed to:

1. assist working educators to transition to university study and develop associated academic literacies which often differed from everyday professional literacies.
2. bridge a gap between educators as workers and educators as learners by drawing on the literature on learning for work and life (for example Allen and Lewis 2009).
3. map existing skills and knowledge against four year graduate proficiency via an RPL framework informed by Dorothy Smith's (2005) notion of 'generous work'.

Rather than a purist application of these three areas of literature we used insights from this work to shape the culture of the course as supportive *and* interventionist in its approach to interrogating the participants' occupational knowledge. We framed ECE work as:

anything done by people that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about. It means much more than what is done on the job. (Smith 2005, p. 151-2)

ECE work is a collaborative undertaking, but it also

include[s] a whole range of activities that are unpaid, not by any means done exclusively by women, ...[an] underground of unpaid and invisible work that people don't recognise as work nor as a contribution to the economy. (ibid p. 152)

The culture of the course reflected this 'expansive understanding' (cf Smith 2005) of ECE work that went beyond professional roles and professional goals. This approach was promulgated through face-to-face and online delivery of the course, the articulation of the RPL framework that guided student learning and in responding to the claims students submitted.

Overview of the program

ECE educators entering the program brought with them extensive prior knowledge and diverse skill sets. Many, however, had not participated in higher education study for some time. EDUC 5138 comprised two modules: recognising prior learning in ECE and understanding professional and work related learning cultures. This paper deals primarily with student responses to the first module which canvassed contemporary professional learning and ECE research literature and current ECE policy contexts and an introduction to

the key principles of RPL. The first assignment aligned with the first module comprised 40% of the total grade [and also the major focus of this paper] was an RPL claim in which students reviewed their accumulated expertise, organisational experience and professional achievements and assembled a claim with accompanying evidence that demonstrated their competence as equivalent to or better than that expected of a graduate educator in up to 3 professional knowledge domains. The RPL application had two levels of assessment:

1. presentation and substantiation of the claim in relation to workplace evidence and contemporary ideas about ECE methodologies and contemporary policies; and
2. submission to a committee comprising industry partners and ECE academics to assess the validity of the claim against ECE graduate equivalence.

The RPL framework was derived from Smith's notion of generous (ECE) work and the permeable boundaries associated with complex occupational expertise (cf Seddon 2008). In addition ECE work increasingly involved working in teams, cooperating with various service providers and setting up integrated practices to respond to children and families. This complex set of work practices required the course lecturer to provide considerable guidance to the students in terms of how they might capture, present and substantiate their expertise as relevant, authentic, current, transferable and achieved to a level expected for graduate study.

Methods and data collection

Data was collected from three student cohorts enrolled between March 2010 - June 2011. The five types of data comprised:

1. student responses to exercises about their sense of competence during the face-to-face workshops. This provided information about personal reflections on learning as well as identification of aspects of academic literacies that still concerned them,
2. formative and summative evaluation activities covered periods when participants' sense of uncertainty was often at its height and later when they had received feedback on assignments and had had a chance to talk with colleagues and staff about ideas presented in the course. The activities included personal reflections on learning as well as commentary on aspects of academic literacies,
3. institutionally mandated surveys presented to students at the end of each course,
4. de-identified information from the RPL applications including: initial qualifications, sector experience, experience in the teaching profession, and RPL claim categories, and,
5. a series of semi-structured discussions undertaken by the authors exploring our conceptualisation of the project, management of the program and reflections on teaching and learning in EDUC 5138.

The project received UniSA Human Research Ethics Committee approval.

Participants

Total enrolments comprised 87 preschool teachers and early childhood consultants: 3 males and 84 females. They were located across metropolitan, rural and remote regions of South Australia, although more than half came from rural and remote regions, reflecting the preferential selection criteria assigned by DECD.

Qualifications

Participants held a variety of qualifications, with the majority (57 of 87 - 66%) holding a non-early childhood education teaching qualification. This profile is not reflective of the broader population of preschool teachers (DEEWR 2010). To an extent it illustrates two points: the

weighting given to non-ECE and 3-year trained educators as part of DECD's intent to "upskill" the workforce; and the willingness of employees to enrol in higher education and grapple with the inherent challenges that accompany national policy change.

Work profiles of participants

The majority of participants (66%) indicated that they were experienced teachers, with ten or more years in the field, and 33% with 20 or more years. Forty of the 87 participants were currently employed in an acting/director role in their preschool, with the remainder in either teacher or consultant roles. We do not know if these data are reflective of the profile of preschool teachers in this State. Another point of interest regarding preschool teachers in South Australia is that the reported attrition rate (pers comm. DECD staff 2011) is very low, at 3%. Together, these data suggest a very stable, older workforce.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data raised four key questions associated with the development of RPL applications to document ECE work in the context of the COAG change agenda and our expanded notion of work practices in ECE contexts used.

1. What kind of occupational knowledge did participants document?
2. What reflections did participants have of the 'generous work' RPL exercise?
3. How did they negotiate new academic literacies?
4. How did they navigate work/life/study/home balances?

In the following pages we explore these issues, identify two emerging tensions and examine them in relation to the challenges we faced as university academics working with education systems to support ECE workers through a time of dynamic policy change.

Documenting ECE occupational knowledge and experience

The RPL process was a way of recognising the knowledge and experience that preschool teachers had developed over a number of years, the practice of which is embedded in their day to day work. This work includes special interests of these teachers in curricula and/or pedagogical areas but also includes all the invisible work undertaken to run a preschool effectively. It is consistent with Smith's notion of 'generous work'. Examples include, the efforts made by teachers to extend the boundaries of the learning and teaching space into the community, the conduct of inquiry based projects, and day to day managerial and leaderships functions of working in the site. It is about setting the context for learning and teaching, and is a case of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. RPL was an important part of the structural framework for this project and it aimed to achieve two things: recognise the knowledge acquired across many years of employment; and, help educators identify and critically engage with contemporary ECE discourses. RPL could be achieved in three ways: for formal study which was substantially similar to a course students would complete in MBIE (direct credit); for previously accredited formal study; and, for unspecified credit associated with on-the-job learning.

While frequencies for individual curriculum areas were quite low (except for early years literacy which comprised 31 of 49 claims in the curriculum area), participants were confident in their claims as leaders and specialists in early childhood education, with accumulated training, experience and knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogical approach specific to this field. All but one participant (who had limited employment time from which to assemble her application) were able to align their understandings of their everyday work as ECE professionals with three field-informed, thematic domains of professional expertise and provide evidence to support their RPL claim. Of these claims only

seven of the 87 claims mentioned previous accredited study as part of their RPL claim. A total of 80 of the 87 claims were based entirely on 'unspecified credit' or an argument that rested on workplace and informal learning accumulated over lengthy periods of employment. Of these, 17 claims were returned to participants with a request that they refine the focus of their occupational expertise. For instance, some claims requested two separate domains for management and administration however evidence for the distinctiveness of the separate fields of occupational knowledge was not substantiated. Twenty seven claims required minor modifications. The balance of 36 claims remained unchanged through the RPL application process.

The participant claims supported our initial impression that educators brought to the program and their RPL applications a range of diverse experiences and knowledge about ECE work. Nevertheless the most difficult part of the exercise was substantiating the claims via a process which also required the educators to demonstrate graduate level academic literacies and align their expertise with 'graduate competence' that also reflected awareness of contemporary theories and change practices evident in the field. In fact this was one of the most challenging issues participants faced even as experienced professionals.

What reflections did participants have of the 'generous work' RPL exercise?

The participants experienced quite pragmatic stresses associated with shifting their skills base to undertake graduate study, bearing in mind that most had obtained their initial teaching qualification many years earlier and some as far back as the mid-70s. The orientation of the course was quite 'open' to reflect and accommodate the varied experience within and across each cohort and reveal prior learning we may not have initially imagined as relevant to the applications. Some students related well to this design, reporting there was it a 'logical sequence to material, [and] the pace of the workshop'. Others appreciated the cyclic approach and that there was 'time to ponder, question, receive answers and re-ask the same questions for more clarification' and opportunity for 'presenting concepts then revisiting based on participants' needs/feedback'. Where external expertise was brought in it aligned well with this approach: 'Learning and Teaching Unit input – clear digestible, useful, linked well with where I am at as a student'. Participants also had suggestions for how improvements could be made to the organisation ranging from suggestions for delivery such as, 'a short presentation from library staff on library searches to set the scene for literature search', to pedagogical suggestions that would better assist their learning: the note taking matrix would have been helpful in Intensive 1 [rather than later]'; 'low charts etc useful to help us organise thinking'; and, 'questions could be placed on sticky notes so that thread of input can be maintained rather than the jumping everywhere and responding to one group of people'.

Some students' most frustrating experiences stemmed from engaging with the RPL framework used for the course. As noted this was deliberately designed to be responsive to a complex and not easily named field of practice – ECE work – and recognise the permeable boundaries across centre/community/everyday life that impinged on early childhood *learning*. Some students found it more difficult to grapple with the fluid guidelines provided: 'I prefer working within a defined, specific framework. The RPL [was] very difficult. The head work required to define my own topic'. Many times we received feedback during workshops requesting quite specific advice: 'show [us] a claim, how it is done ... still feel confused/very unsure' and tell us 'what an RPL application looks like. [It] could be shown on the first day to demystify'. People did not always like the uncertainty or the pedagogical strategies used to navigate the process. In response to what could be changed one advised: 'not randomly

[saying] ‘big hints’ but actually having a list of ‘this is what I expect...’, this is what I do not want [in an RPL application]’.

From the outset the design of the course ran counter to one that would primarily ‘download’ study skills and present the participants with a one size fits all template for the idealised RPL application. Many responses to these challenges, however, showed the kind of self-reflection and introspection one would expect from active and engaged professionals. Participants recognised how the learning culture being cultivated through collaborative exercises contributed to their own learning. Comments included:

the total package was important in order to create the context for future learning
I learned to think about myself in a different way
I have a vast range of skills and I often don’t stop and appreciate it
Chip away at it... do the readings... do the activities/tasks and in time all the elements will fall into place – do more, panic less. Trust the process, enjoy the process
I have gained the ability to articulate the work I do

Negotiating academic literacies

Returning to study also required participants to develop a skill set needed for new learning and assessment within an academic context. Analysis of participant feedback about academic literacies suggested some recognised that there was still scope for more complete development of these skills, for example, referencing, avoiding plagiarism, working within a range of different writing genres, note taking, and ICT skills. They expressed concern about being able to write using academic convention, with one commenting: ‘How do I meld my ideas with current research without plagiarising?’ Others had difficulty engaging with the academic literature and understanding it. Comments included:

Wordy readings. Reading fluently with unknown words and making meaning
Some big words, eg. ‘trajectories’ in ECE; epitimology (can’t even spell it!).
Hard to follow thread of lecturer’s meaning through each reading – what do they want me to get out of it?

Our ‘blended delivery’ approach (Groen and Li 2005) required students to have some degree of confidence with IT skills and familiarity with university enrolment and assessment systems. Negotiating information and communication technology was a frequently mentioned hurdle: ‘[my] ICT skills not great. Had trouble uploading my appendices’ and ‘I had to [learn to] negotiate around the UniSA website’. Peer collaboration was one aspect of the approach that was greatly valued by participants and provided a supportive learning environment where teachers could work with their similarly placed peers. The foundations of peer collaboration were laid during the first intensive workshop and stood some in good stead later in the program:

The collaborative approach to my learning – affirmation, networking/discussing ideas with the cohort who is on common ground
The opportunity to listen to others identify their skills: it made me re-think mine
I am not alone – we are in this together. In other words, our group is supporting my learning and affirming my thinking in relation to course content

A consistent piece of feedback emerged across all data sets: being part of a community of learners which acted variously as a sounding board, a collegial space to go to when they felt overwhelmed or isolated, and a forum where they might gain a comparative perspective. This was a space (often virtual) where they could share ideas, ponder their learning during the intensive and then return (often via the online discussion boards) to revisit an issue or build upon it in light of later readings and experience.

Managing work/life/study/home balance

No neat profiles of these early childhood teachers emerged, however the cohort had some common issues in the way they experienced their return to study and the challenges they faced in navigating the pressures of work, life, study and their home life balance:

It was hard to calm my head to take on board the course requirements when other things at work were screaming at me

I need to make time to study on my one day off instead of going into work to catch up on paperwork!

I passed the first assignment under great duress of juggling three jobs and working more than full time

Emergent tensions

In reflecting on the data and pushing ourselves to interrogate our own understandings of responses we identified two tensions that participants experienced as they entered graduate study and had to balance many demands made of them.

Splitting words. Voluntary, semi-voluntary, mandatory workforce development

Across the above data it was clear the teachers had not returned to study fully of their own volition. DECD had offered scholarships in a policy environment, described previously, that mandated all four year old children have a four year early childhood qualified teacher. The 'top down feel' of the policy initiative and hence the semi-voluntary/semi-mandated enrolment in EDUC 5138 was read to mean their long experience and past contributions to this field were not fully valued. This influenced their initial engagement in EDUC 5138. Some embraced the opportunity:

I'm focussed on me (and what I can get out of the process) rather than feel frustrated about "what is imposed". It's really about perception, at the end this was my choice.

Others, however, were less enthusiastic:

I thought I was a competent teacher, but found out I was an incompetent student' 'I have experience that should be recognised at graduate level

I am incredibly anxious about many things – getting my readings read, answering the questions, writing the assignments (especially and finally the results)

In our reading of wider literature to make sense of some of these responses we were reminded of course that people experience stress when they are in new situations which are unpredictable, challenge their identity, and over which they have low control (Lupien & Wan, 2006, p.3). This was certainly the case with many of these participants. By the end of EDUC 5138, many participants, however, did acknowledge that they were on a steep learning curve with their re-entry into study, and that some stress was inevitable. They could also thoughtfully reflected on their learning during the course:

I am equipped to complete this course despite a few concerns initially

'I have discovered that I can do this with help from my friends and colleagues

I am enjoying 'learning'. I found myself talking about the World Bank at the breakfast table

'I have learned to get on with the task (not procrastinate) and to time manage – this requires discipline

I can do it! Just have to work my way through it chunk by chunk

I still have a lot to learn about EC methodologies

Just show me!

Although some students embraced the return to study, there was a noticeable tension between engaging in the learning process and being shown how. This was particularly the case with what seemed like the more instrumental aspects of assignments, online postings, or activities in the workshops. While debate and discussion with colleagues was valued, at times students wanted to 'cut to the chase' and complete an exercise. Many students wanted an example of how to do an RPL claim, yet they also recognised the problems associated with this given their diverse experiences, life and professional choices, and professional locations. Although templates requesting length of service, type of service, lists of professional domains, definitions of what constituted a particular domain of professional expertise and so on could have helped to capture ECE occupational knowledge, we resisted nailing down ECE occupational knowledge to a single template.

Engaging in deep thinking about professional identity and the learning process required time to reflect, discuss, clarify and explore different ideas and issues. One student reflected:

I left both lots of intensive days quite confused as to the expectations of us in relation to both assignments. It was not until I went away and read what other people had posted on the forums or I had discussions with colleagues and did more in relation to the readings that things became clearer to me.

Time, however was something many participants found in short supply. While studies support the view that qualifications are important and in fact do contribute to enhanced learning for children in ECE settings (Sylva, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003; Tayler et al., 2006), the participants in this study also found it hard to balance new demands of study with additional work-life pressures. It was hard to fit it all in.

The workload throughout the course was significant and difficult to manage with the requirements of my work and family

Coming from a country site requires a travel day on top of attending the intensive - 3 days out of a site with no relief staff is difficult

I think I need longer than 3 weeks to get it done and to think about all this while managing another workload

Whatever is screaming at me gets the attention

Managing study alongside other demands of work and family is increasingly being recognised as one of the greatest challenges facing people in the process of upgrading qualifications and maintaining employment. For this cohort, the tension was perhaps compounded by the circumstances surrounding their return to study. The DECD scholarships provided an opportunity to update their qualifications without bearing financial costs. However, the perceived mandatory nature of the upgrade program (promoted in no small part by COAG policy mandates) also meant that some participants felt obligated to undertake the program. Without the impetus from DECD, it is unknown how many of this cohort would have freely chosen to enter the program at this time. When deciding to voluntarily return to study, students are likely to consider their personal situation and make a judgment about their desire and capacity to take on study in addition to their everyday responsibilities. In the present situation, however, returning to study for these participants may not have represented an 'ideal' time and for some, was an obvious additional burden.

Conclusions

This project began as a response to a federal policy agenda that simultaneously cast doubt on the quality and capacity of the ECE field and offered a solution in the form of

qualifications upgrade. Initiatives to improve the quality of the teaching workforce are not new. Some participants began the program with a degree of scepticism and felt offended that their accumulated occupational skills and knowledge were not being valued. This undercurrent of feeling, evident throughout the intensives, tended to frame some participants' approach to their return to study.

Smith's work helped here, but also hampered, in that it resisted neat definitions of the assignment, neat definitions of occupational knowledge, and neat definitions of experience. In following Smith's notion of 'generous work' there was an obvious tension between engaging with the everyday realities of participants' work, building profiles of ECE professional expertise from the ground up, providing some advice in terms of prevailing discourses of ECE work and running the risk of 'hooking' the participants into dominant discourses of ECE that then defy recognition of the professional expertise they have accumulated over time. We were inadvertently drawn into an exercise that aimed to recognise experienced teachers accumulated knowledge, as it simultaneously reformatted that experience according to required expectations of graduate competence. This presented us with a paradox: to map experience against notions of graduate competence which was in itself a function of the categories and concepts of ECE work we were trying to render more complex and permeable through the 'generous' – the other, the not noticed, the not mandated, the unpaid, the extra – work they undertook. Thus, the contradiction between drawing on Smith's work and at the same time encouraging people to align with conventional ways of naming occupational knowledge they had accumulated, was a tension, and an ongoing one that remains in any workforce development agenda.

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