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First year early childhood education students' beliefs about children in long day child care

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**First year early childhood education students' beliefs about
children in long day child care**

Paper presented at the Australian Teacher Education Association conference,
Fremantle, July 5-8 2006.

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It has been suggested, anecdotally, that many early childhood education and care (ECEC) students hold deeply negative views of long day child care and the parents and families that make use of these services. Given that these students will be well qualified to one day be directing/teaching in long day child care services, this negativity is a contradictory, incongruent and troubling thought. This pilot study has sought to provide evidence (or otherwise) for the anecdotal suggestion that students consider full time long day care to be negative and undesirable situation. Furthermore, we are investigating the teaching options we can provide in our preservice teacher education whereby students have the opportunity to develop more critical and thoughtful understandings of parents and child care choices/options.

There is scant research on the views ECEC students and formal long day care (but see Vajda, 2005; Hill & Veale, 1997; Varga & Lanning, 1998). As the use of this form of ECEC provision increases in Australia the views of the staff regarding the families, and women in particular, who use long day care will become more important. Teaching of any sort is bound up in fragmented subjectivities (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006), that impact upon outcomes for children. How a teacher thinks about, feels and values children, their families and education is intricately bound up in the kind of teacher they are. The work of childcare teachers is not exempt from this fragmentation, including the relationships between how teachers think about the world and how they engage with the children and families they work amongst. If anything, this complexity is intensified within the dominant discursive construction of parents as partners in early childhood education and care.

Maternalism, changing families and changing child care choices

The now infamous, 'one for the mother, one for the father and one for the country' comment by the Treasurer Peter Costello in 2004 reflects the deeply seated discourse of maternalism in Australian society and politics. Attached to

this statement in 2004 were a number of policies aimed towards enabling mothers to return to the paid labour market. However, as van Acker (2005) argues, the policies are focused on a narrow version of motherhood, family and work. This version of motherhood is deeply embedded in maternalism and 'traditional' family values, which remain as the governing discourses across a range of social and educational policy and programmes.

Rabe-Kleberg (2006, p.2) suggests that maternalism is a 'cultural understanding of motherhood and...a specific way of dealing with mothers and their work and competence'. One explicit piece of policy evidence for the very traditional, maternalistic understandings of women who are mothers of young children, and who undertake paid labour is maternity leave. Australia and the USA are the only two OECD countries that do not provide a period of *paid* statutory entitlement for maternity (or parental) leave (OECD, 2006).

Despite this lack of government support, almost half of those women with children under five are now in the paid labour market, and many of those may use formal care for their children (ABS, 2004). The ABS (2004) suggests that,

While the number of children spending some time in care has remained similar over the past decade (1.5 million children aged 0-11 years in both 1993 and 2002), the types of care used and the age of children involved have both changed over this period. Parents have increasingly used formal child care over informal care and the proportion of younger children (0-4 years) spending some time in care has increased.

Furthermore, the ABS (2004) also reports that 'the proportion of 0-4 year olds spending some time in long day care doubled from 11% in 1993 to 23% in 2002'. It is very clear therefore that early childhood education and care (and formal long day care in particular) is of growing importance for women with young children.¹

¹ The ABS does not refer to men and fathers in the report consulted, although they are implied in some points made about families.

What the first year early childhood education and care students had to say

We distributed a questionnaire to around 100 first year Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) students during a mass lecture for a core unit. Some students chose not to take part and we collected 76 completed questionnaires. One of the questions was 'how do you feel about children being in fulltime long day childcare?' Of the 76 responses, 5 were unproblematically positive, 2 were unclear and 68 were negative. Many were quite blunt:

I think it's absurd, it's the parent's responsibility to care of the children, not somebody else's.

Against it. Why have children!?

Not acceptable – it's unfair on the child.

I don't think it's good.

I feel sorry for them.

Don't like it!

Not good for child.

I don't like the idea at all why did they have children in the first place?

Maher et al (2004) found that young, non-mothers felt more strongly and negatively about mothers using institutional child care. Given the demographics of this first year group – mostly young women without children – the comments made provide further support for Maher et al's claim that 'women without children were much more likely to identify

mothering as a full-time job and express ambivalence towards the use of child care, particularly for younger children' (Maher, Dever, Curtin & Singleton 2004, p. 29).

Many of the negative responses were conditional on issues such as length of time spent in the centre and if the parent/s were working or not.

Well, it depends really. Parents who have to work for income reasons can't be faulted for this. So it depends really on reason.

If there's no where else for them to go as parents and families are working it's fine, however, some families just use it to 'mind' their children while they do things for themselves, is wrong if constantly happening.

Long day care makes them very tired, especially every day. But if you have to be working, try not to have them in care every day.

The parents are in a vicious cycle and most times have to use it. Although I feel you allow someone or many to bring up your child. So how does the child know the values, principles, morals of the family. Also I feel sorry for the exhausted child.

I think it is too much for them but if the family needs the money to support themselves there is nothing that anyone can do about it.

I appreciate that this is needed especially for full time families but can often be abused by non working families.

Almost half (33) of the 68 negative responses suggested that fulltime long day childcare was detrimental to family relationships. For example,

I have a very biased opinion that it destroys the bond between the child and family

...parents need to spend time with their children

It is sad that some children see their day carers more often than their parents!

I believe that they miss out on some valuable experiences with their parents.

A child belongs within the family!

In most circumstances children need their parents!!

I feel sorry for the child as I feel they are missing valuable opportunities with their family.

Miss out on mother/father/family relationships

I don't think it's beneficial for the child or family in the long run.

They need family time.

Ok, as long as they still get to spend time with their families as well.

I think time should be left for families.

Too much contact away from the home environment.

The theme throughout these comments seems to be that there is somehow no family time left at all if young children are in formal, fulltime long day care. The lack of understanding or empathy for the mothers (and families) using long day child care should not really have been so surprising and distressing. After all, the (mostly) young women studying for this degree are a reflection of the dominant discursive patterns of maternalism in Australian society – based in the fantasy of father going to work, mother staying at home and the young child as the golden centre of her universe.

Embedding critical practices in courses

The first year responses are deeply troubling for those of us teaching in early childhood education and care courses. Many staff teaching in early childhood units have been actively working towards providing students with the resources and opportunities to think more critically and carefully about families, child care and their future work. This work has taken place, for example, within the units on families, historical and comparative aspects of early childhood, and of course, the child care field experience unit. Here we discuss aspects of the child care field experience unit, which Wendy co-coordinated during semester one this year.

The child care field experience unit is placed in the third year of the degree and is specifically focused on 0-3 year olds. Many of the students are quite negative about having to do this unit. We suggest there may be several issues contributing to and creating this negativity:

- Negative attitudes to young children being in long day care;
- QLD State Regulations do not require the presence of a fully qualified teacher for groups of children 0-3 years old. Rather the requirements are for the Group Leader to be either TAFE Diploma qualified or “enrolled” in a TAFE Diploma course;
- Many of the students do not wish to work with 0-3 year olds as the wages and conditions are not commensurate with other teaching positions in Qld;

- Anecdotal stories about or experience of poor quality of child care centres are rife amongst the students; and,
- Students' backgrounds from their own families.

Vajda (2005) also reports strong resistance and negativity to the need for child care field experience amongst her students, with the reluctance and resistance following similar themes – reduced staff conditions and wages, children shouldn't be in long day care, and the perception it's just babysitting, routine work.

In the child care field experience at QUT there are several ways in which the staff have attempted to engage the students in challenging their negativity regarding child care.

- Address students' negative approach to the field experience during the first week by reporting on previous students' favourable experiences in this unit, and discussing/unpacking their expectations, goals for the unit with these students in the tutorials;
- Requiring students to keep a reflective journal throughout the whole semester on their beliefs, practices and philosophy in the course, and issues related to child care. They are encouraged to unpack their image of the child, of the family, their role as a teacher and professional. [This is linked in with the Research in Child Care unit where students are required to reflect on their epistemological beliefs and conduct research with a fellow student investigating changes in beliefs throughout the semester];
- Encourage students to be involved in the ongoing Discussion Forum with a weekly question regarding child care eg: high quality practice/ national child care issues – such as private ownership/ how to be a responsive caregiver.
- Throughout the semester the lecture topics address the practice of responsive relationships, with children, families, staff and community, high quality ethical practice, the nature of the environment – especially the

human environment, diversity and inclusivity, the importance of the first 3 years of a child's life; and finally,

- During the last lecture, after the students have completed 4 weeks of field experience, having a debate about how child care quality could be improved in Australia.

Reports from the third year students suggest that these activities have been emotionally charged and challenging but ultimately rewarding and informative. Plans are underway to extend and develop these activities.

Conclusion

Since many students of early childhood will be participating in future policies and practices having to do with children and their families, and since access to non maternal child care has a bearing on women's prospects for economic and social equity, it would be important that early childhood specialists view themselves as being in alliance with employed mothers. (Varga & Lanning 1998, p. 19).

The use of long day child care is the reality for around a quarter of the women in Australia with children aged 0-4 years. Given this, it is extremely important that the education and care young children are receiving in such centres is provided by qualified, thoughtful, informed and engaged professionals; professionals who understand the growing importance of the place of long day care in Australia's society and the issues of motherhood, family, equity and policy that are entwined in the work that they do. Further research and teaching work needs to be undertaken to challenge early childhood students to understand and critique the complexities and contradictions inherent in their negative statements about mothers, families and child care.

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