

2011

# Who wants to work in childcare? pre-service early childhood teacher's consideration of work in the child-care sector

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## Publication details

Thorpe, K, Boyd, WA, Ailwood, J & Brownlee, J 2011, 'Who wants to work in childcare? Pre-service early childhood teacher's consideration of work in the child-care sector', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 85-94.

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# Who wants to work in child care?

## Pre-service early childhood teachers' consideration of work in the childcare sector

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**AUSTRALIA IS CURRENTLY WITNESSING** considerable change in conceptualisation of the role of child care. This is a response to the strong evidence from developmental science that demonstrates the lifelong impact of early experiences. The recent commitment made by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (Communiqué, December 2009a) to improved qualifications and quality of those working in child care is a manifestation of this shift and highlights the importance of the childcare workforce. This study focused on the considerations of a third year cohort of B.Ed (EC) pre-service teachers ( $n = 55$ ), about entering the childcare workforce. It examines their willingness to work in child care and identifies barriers and incentives for so doing. Our results indicate that, although attitudes to maternal work and child care were largely positive, few would prefer to work in child care under the current conditions. Key barriers were the pay and work conditions, particularly as they compare to other forms of potential employment. Incentives were the opportunity for leadership, creativity and a commitment to advocate for the rights of children. Those more willing to consider work in child care were distinguished from those less willing by altruism—foregoing personal gain to advocate for improved quality as a child's right.

### Introduction

The early years of life have long been hypothesised as an important life stage that affects functioning in adulthood. However, it is only in recent times that research has been able to provide evidence of the mechanisms that explain the connection between a child's early experience and their lifetime achievement and wellbeing. An accumulation of evidence from studies using a diversity of research designs, including animal studies (for example, Kaffman & Meaney, 2007; Meaney, 2001), longitudinal studies (for example, Kovan, Chung & Sroufe, 2009; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005), experimental interventions (for example, Belfield, Nores, Barnett & Schweinhart, 2006; Muennig, Schweinhart, Montie & Neidell, 2009; Olds et al., 2004) and natural experiments (for example, Rutter et al., 2007) alongside sophisticated neuro-imaging and statistical techniques, has shown that experiences in the period from conception to five years are foundational for brain development and, as a consequence, direct life trajectories. The amount and quality of early experiences have been shown by neuroscience studies to shape neural pathways (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Perry, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) while experiments and longitudinal statistical modelling

provide evidence of causal pathways from early experiences to lifelong learning outcomes and social-emotional functioning (for example, Belfield et al., 2006; Muennig et al., 2009; Olds et al., 2004; Reynolds, Suh-Ruu, & Topitzes, 2004). Poorer early experiences have been shown to reduce a child's life possibilities, while rich and responsive early environments increase them (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This evidence has led to the emergence of preventative science, the study of early intervention to optimise children's life chances through provision of positive early experience, and has also directed focus to educational and care policy and practices in the years from birth to school entry.

The recent Council of Australian Governments (COAG) communiqué on child care (2009a) and publication of the *National quality standard for early childhood education and care and school age care* (2009b) are direct responses to this evidence (see Senate Standing Committee on Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Over the past two years, policy conceptualisation of the role of child care in Australia has shifted from one that focused heavily on the function of enabling parental participation in the workforce to one that adopts the vision of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2006

report, *Starting Strong II*. This vision recognises quality early education and care as a right of the child and provision of high-quality early education experiences as a prudent investment that benefits the individual, society and the economy. Commensurately the shift of attention has been directed away from cost minimisation to focus on raising the quality of provision in child care (Ishimine, Tayler, & Thorpe, 2009; Thorpe, Cloney, & Tayler, in press). The recommendations of the COAG communiqué are that quality of childcare environments, particularly the relational environment, should be increased by improving child to staff ratios and increasing the qualification levels of the childcare workforce. The childcare workforce is, therefore, a centrepiece.

One important component of this strategy is increasing the number of qualified teachers who work within the childcare sector. Though the relationship is by no means simple or direct (see Early et al., 2007) there is evidence that the presence of qualified teachers in childcare settings is associated with higher levels of global quality, more responsive interactions and improved child outcomes (Barnett, 2003; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). However, there may be barriers to entry of degree-qualified staff to child care. This is the focus of the current paper that questions Bachelor of Education degree students specialising in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed (EC)) about their experiences of child care, attitudes to child care and intentions to work in the childcare sector. The B.Ed (EC) qualifies teachers for work in early education settings across the age range birth to eight years. This includes childcare settings for children from birth to five years, specialist early education (preschool/ kindergarten) for three- to five-year olds and the first years of formal schooling from five to eight years. This study asks whether B.Ed (EC) pre-service teachers are willing to work in the childcare sector and examines the barriers and incentives for so doing.

There is currently a dearth of research evidence on pre-service and graduate early childhood teachers' attitudes and intentions to work in the childcare sector. While there is significant academic and popular literature on the effects of non-parental care on the child and emerging literature documenting parents' views about using child care (for example, Harris, 2008), an extensive literature search found only one peer-reviewed published paper (Hill & Veale, 1997) and two conference presentations (Field & Varga, 1997; Vajda, 2005) on this subject. Field and Varga (1997) and Hill and Veale (1997) consider attitudes to maternal work and use of child care, the former in a Canadian sample and the latter in an Australian sample. Both studies report that students held negative attitudes about maternal work and child care and concluded that such attitudes ran contrary

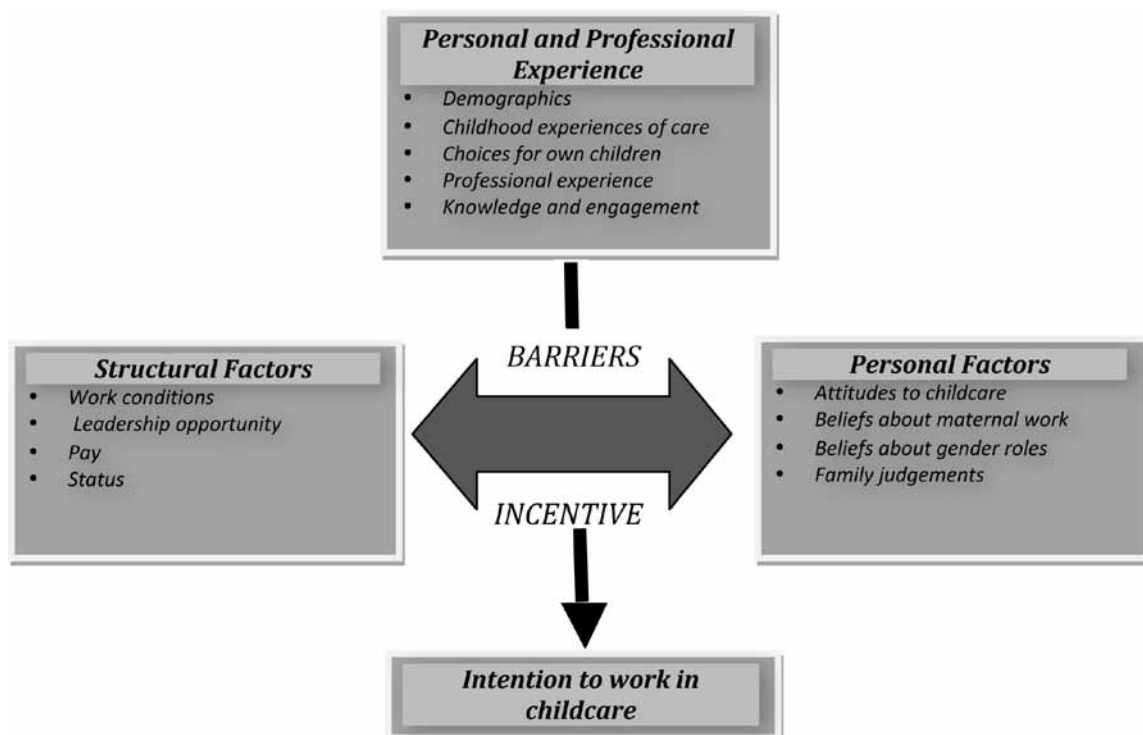
to positive engagement in early childhood education and care settings. The value of these studies is in indicating the potential role of personal value systems; however, the context of maternal employment has changed rapidly across the 13 years since these papers were written. Vajda (2005) presents a more recent study of eight pre-service teachers' views of doing practicum in a childcare centre. In this study the students saw maternal employment as a necessity but viewed child care negatively and were reluctant to participate in practicum. The study reported that students' views became more positive after they had experienced practicum and witnessed the value of the experience for children's learning. Though small, this study provides important insight into the mismatch between held views and reality of the childcare experience and directs attention to both the importance of value systems and direct experiences. In the current study, value systems and experience in child care were incorporated into the modelling and design.

In the absence of a strong extant literature, our research team developed a theoretical model of factors associated with intention to work in child care. This directed the study design and content of the questions asked of participants. In keeping with prior studies (Field & Varga, 1997; Hill & Veale, 1997; Vajda, 2005) our model, presented in Figure 1, commenced with the hypothesis that personal and professional experience of child care, along with professional education, would affect the valuing of child care as a professional option. A comprehensive set of variables capturing personal and professional experience were included. The model then introduced factors, both personal and structural, that might moderate this association. To measure belief systems about childcare provision, a self-report, attitudinal scale was developed that asked about views of the child and the value of child care.

Our study was exploratory and addressed four key questions:

1. Who is studying for a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and what are their motives?
2. What are the students' value systems relating to maternal employment, gender roles, childcare provision and usage of pre-service early childhood teachers?
3. What structural factors are the most salient in preventing or encouraging willingness to consider participation in the childcare workforce?
4. What proportions of pre-service teachers intend, or would consider, working in the childcare sector and what distinguishes them from those who would not consider this option?

Figure 1: Model of key factors influencing intention to work in childcare



## Method

### Participants

The participants were 55 Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) students in their third year of study of a four-year degree at an Australian university. These represented 80% of the total year cohort ( $n = 69$ ) of B.Ed (EC) students. As part of this course students undertook a unit of teaching and practicum in child care (Early Childhood Field Studies 3), alongside a unit in Research Methods in Early Childhood. All students were recruited when they attended the first lecture of the Research Methods unit. Non-participants were those who did not attend the first lecture ( $n = 10$ , 15%) and those who chose not to complete the questionnaire and returned it blank ( $n = 4$ , 5%). The cohort was almost totally female (96%,  $n = 53$ ), had a mean age of 21.1 years (range 19–36 years, SD 3.2 years) and most ( $n = 48$ , 84.1%) had entered the degree from school. Of the cohort, two (2.95%) held a previous degree, nine (13.1%) had a Technical and Further Education qualification in child care and four (5.8%) of the students were parents.

### Measure development

A pilot study was conducted in the year prior to

that on which we currently report. This study was exploratory and employed open-ended questions which were distributed to a cohort of 76 first-year B.Ed (EC) students. The open-ended responses guided our questionnaire development for close-ended response questions and has previously been reported (Ailwood & Boyd, 2007).

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed to measure the key components of the model of intentions to work in child care. Each section contained numerically coded questions to allow quantitative analyses, but also provided open-ended response sections to allow qualitative accounts. There were four key sections that mapped onto the model:

1. *Personal and professional experience.* The items obtained information on age, gender, number of children, use of child care for own children, qualifications, experience working in the childcare sector and other forms of work with children, membership of professional organisations, childhood experience of non-parental care, and reason for undertaking B.Ed (EC).
2. *Personal value and belief systems.* We measured five dimensions of values and beliefs:

- a. *Gender roles attitudes scale*. This was an 8-item scale assessing the beliefs about the role of men and women in paid employment, child care and household tasks.
  - b. *Cost of maternal employment (BCME—cost)*. This was a modification of the original BACMEC costs sub-scale (Greenberger, Goldberg, Crawford, & Granger, 1988). It included 14 items which were statements (for example, children learn more if their mothers stay at home with them) rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree through to strongly disagree).
  - c. *Benefits of maternal employment (BCME—benefit)*. This was a modification of the original BACMEC benefits sub-scale (Greenberger et al., 1988). It included 14 items which were statements (for example, children whose mothers work are more adaptable) rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree through to strongly disagree).
  - d. *Childcare attitudes*. This 7-item scale assessed beliefs about the purpose and value of childcare for children and families (for example, long day care supports children and families). These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree through to strongly disagree).
  - e. *Judgement of family use of child care*. This was an 8-item scale asking respondents to judge on a 3-point scale (preferable, acceptable, and not acceptable) the acceptability of different family types using long day care. Family types included: depressed mother, single parent, low-income dual worker, average-income dual worker, high-income dual worker, non-working mother, non-working father and families wanting to promote their children's development.
3. *Structural barriers and incentives for employment in child care*. This was an 8-item scale that asked respondents to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (strong barrier through to strong incentive) how a range of structural features affected their willingness to work in child care. The items included level of pay, work conditions (flexibility, holiday tasks), work opportunities, leadership, and status (social status, 'not education').
  4. *Intention to work in child care*. A 4-point Likert scale (definitely will not work in childcare, prefer not, possibly, preferred place of employment) was used to assess willingness to work in child care.

## Procedure

All students were recruited during attendance at the first lecture of the Research Methods unit. They were informed that the study was a longitudinal examination of

their views about child care and that there would be data collection points before and after a scheduled childcare practicum later in the semester. To enable anonymous participation, students were asked to generate a six symbol unique identification code comprised of the first three letters of their mother's maiden name and the last three numbers of their mobile phone (or if no mobile, their home phone). Questionnaires were completed and returned within the lecture. The same procedure and identifier was used at the second data collection which was conducted after the experiences of a childcare practicum in the penultimate lecture of the semester. This allowed linkage of data across the two time points.

## Analyses

In analyses addressing research questions 1, 2 and 3, numeric data were entered into the SPSS statistical package to generate descriptive statistics and corresponding open-ended responses were read and emergent categories of response identified. In the reporting of qualitative data, examples of each category are presented in text. In addressing research question 4, frequencies of response to the outcome variable were obtained and subsequently two categories of student derived: those willing (preferred option, willing to consider) and those less willing (would not consider and prefer not to work in child care). Statistical analyses explored associations between these two categories and the demographic, structural and value measures. Qualitative data for those willing and less willing to work in child care was examined and distinguishing characteristics identified. Text is presented to illustrate these differences in presentation of results.

## Results

### Question 1: Who is studying for a B.Ed (EC) and what are their motives?

Summary statistics describing the cohort of students are presented in Table 1. This data indicates that those studying for a B.Ed with an early childhood speciality were a highly homogenous group who were female (97%), had entered their degree from school (84.1%) and had not experienced non-parental care as children (83.6%). Only a small minority held a previous degree (2.95%) or had a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualification in child care (13.1%) or were parents (5.8%). All (100%) enjoyed being with children (86%) and intended to be, or were already, parents (97%). The majority viewed their degree as leading to work in the Preparatory–Year 3 sector of education (85.%) rather than child care (11.1%); saw that a degree in Early Childhood Education suited their skills

(96.4%); and that the conditions of work (68.5%) would suit future plans to have a family (66.7%).

Variable	Category	n	%
Sex	Male	2	3.0
	Female	53	97.0
Have own children	yes	4	5.8
	no	51	94.2
Intention to have children	None	2	3.6
	One	4	7.3
	Two	25	45.5
	Three or more	24	43.6
Childhood experience of non-parental care	No non-parental care	46	83.6
	Family/ friend	3	5.5
	paid care	1	1.8
	long day-care	5	9.1
Experience with children	Work in childcare	10	21.3
	Teacher aide	6	12.5
	After school hours care	15	21.7
	Other paid work with children	27	39.1
	Voluntary work	24	34.8
Current Qualifications	TAFE - childcare	3	6.4
	TAFE- teacher aide	2	4.3
	TAFE - other	6	12.2
	Degree other than education	2	4.3
	Postgraduate degree	0	0.0
Member of professional organisation	yes	10	14.5
	no	45	85.5
B.Ed (EC) first choice of degree	yes	43	78.2
	no	12	21.8
Reason for choosing B.Ed (EC)	To work in childcare	6	11.1
	To work Pre-3	47	85.5
	Enjoy children	55	100.0
	Hours of work	37	68.5
	Fits with having a family	36	66.7
	Suits my skills	53	96.4

Qualitative data were derived from an open-ended question 'Please comment on any reasons for choosing early childhood education'. Of the total cohort, 35 students (64%) provided comment. Data was examined and coding categories derived. There were six categories: two relate to emotional and intellectual interest (passionate about children and children's rights, intellectual interest in child development and

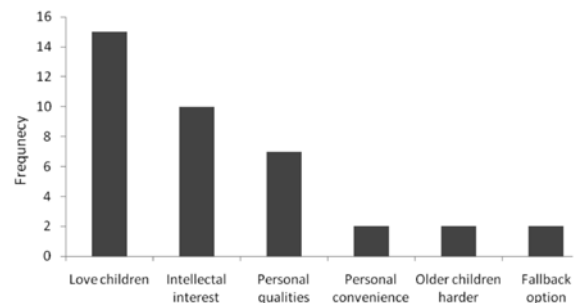
early education); two to personal needs (convenience for life plans, suits personal qualities) and two to comparison with alternative options (failed to get into preferred option, older children harder to teach). Some students provided multiple reasons and two provided responses that could not be coded. Figure 2 presents summary results. These indicate that concern for the rights of children, intellectual interest in education and child development, and personal qualities (for example creativity) were the key motives for choosing the degree:

*I find that children are amazing in their theories, thoughts and provocations. I chose early childhood because I wanted to learn more about children and provide the best possible education for them (Student 3).*

*I feel that as a teacher I could impact positively on the lives and learning of young children. I also believe that children's learning and capabilities are of importance to me and wish to enhance these through teaching (Student 37).*

*I am a very creative person—teaching in the early years allows me to extend and utilise this skill (Student 48).*

Figure 2: Motivation for undertaking B.Ed (Early Childhood)



In addition, a small number of students perceived a career in early childhood education as convenient, as easier than other areas of education or as a fallback to a preferred career option for which they had not qualified:

*I really look forward to having my own family and being able to fit work in with family (Student 23).*

*Because children get worse as they get older (Student 34).*

*I didn't get into my first choice ... so did Anthropology and didn't see it going anywhere. Mum suggested doing teaching and it seemed like a good idea (Student 21).*

### Question 2: What are the value systems of pre-service early childhood teachers?

Summary statistics of the attitudinal measures are provided in Table 2. Across the sample the distribution



of gender attitude scores indicated that students held non-traditional, gender-role attitudes. On the gender attitudes measure a score range from 0–32 was possible. All participants scored in the higher range of the score distribution (range 19–32, mean 25.87, SD 2.98). This indicates that the students held beliefs that men and women had equal rights and role in workforce participation, household tasks and care of the child.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for attitudinal measures

Variable	Range	Mean	SD
Gender attitude ( 0–32)	19–32	25.87	2.94
BCME – Cost (0–56)	2–31	14.02	5.8
BCME – Benefits (0–56)	6–39	25,7	7.7
Family judgement ( 0–56)	0–27	14.78	7.76
Childcare attitude (0–28)	15–26	20.63	2.3

Scores on the BCME indicated views about the costs and benefits of maternal employment on children’s development and wellbeing. For both costs and benefits the potential scores were 0–56, with higher scores indicating higher levels of cost and benefit respectively. The scores for a cost of maternal employment to the child were in the lower end of this potential distribution (range 2–31, mean = 14.02, SD 5.8), suggesting that the group did not view the costs of maternal employment to children to be high. The variability within the group was low, suggesting this view was common across the group. In contrast, the sample was more divided about the benefits of maternal employment to the child with a wider distribution of scores (range 6–39) and a mean of 24.7 (SD 7.7).

Scores on the family judgement scale allowed potential scores from 0 (all families have right to use child care without judgement) to 56 (use of child care is unacceptable for any family). The scores were in the lower end of the distribution (range 0–27, mean = 14.78, SD 7.6) suggesting that most participants believed that parents from diverse family circumstance had a right to access child care.

Scores on attitudes to child care ranged from 0 to 28, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes to the educational and social support function of child care. Among the cohort the range of scores was high (15–26) but the mean (20.63, SD 2.3), near the top of the distribution, suggested that most held positive views of child care.

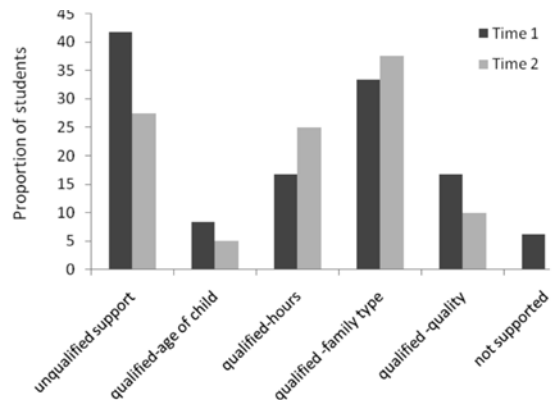
Qualitative accounts were obtained in response to the question ‘Please comment on your views about parents’ use of long day care for birth to three-year-olds’. Responses were provided by 48 (87%) of students at Time 1 and 40 (58%) at Time 2. These are summarised in Figure 3. The highest frequency of comments provided unqualified support for family

usage of long day care, as the following two comments indicate:

*Everyone should have access to child care and I make no judgements about families who use child care (Student 1).*

*Day-care is necessary for many families to lead balanced lives and children can benefit greatly from quality care (Student 6).*

Figure 3: Views about parent’s usage of long day-care for 0–3-year-olds at Time 1 and Time 2



Many students felt that usage of long day care should be for restricted hours and some indicated it was not appropriate for children in the first year of life:

*I have mixed beliefs and views on child care for birth to three-year olds. I believe it is important for children to have opportunity for social interaction however I think birth to one-and-a-half years is a little young to be there five days a week. Part-time child care, I believe, provides rich experiences (Student 13).*

Many also indicated that long day care was only acceptable for usage of particular family types, such as single parents or families of working parents:

*I think there should be limitations e.g. a single parent may use long day care five days per week whereas a non-working parent should limit to one full day or two half-days (Student 30).*

*Most parents I know of who use long day care are single parents or both working. I see child care as a waste of money if parents or relatives are able to take care of the child (Student 39).*

Some acknowledged the potential benefit to children and children’s right of access, and included comments about the need for high-quality provision:

*It should not be about the parent but about the child and their right to education regardless of what their family circumstances are (Student 32).*

**Question 3: What structural factors are the most salient in preventing or encouraging willingness to consider participation in the childcare workforce?**

Responses to the structural barriers and incentives of working in child care are presented in Figure 4. These suggest that the barriers are overwhelmingly structural factors: pay, work hours and poor status of the work. Figures 5 and 6 present coded qualitative responses to the question ‘Please comment on the factors that are barriers or incentives to you working in child care’. These responses elaborated on the saliency of pay conditions and status as structural barriers:

*I want to be paid according to my degree level. Money is a huge factor in today’s society (Student 1).*

*The views society has on child care affect the levels of pay and working conditions ... if child care was viewed as an educational setting (because it is one!) then I would have no hesitation working in child care (Student 11).*

*Incentives for working in long day care are the flexibility and enjoyment of working with young children. However pay is a major barrier (Student 9).*

*The status and hours are really inflexible. The changing shifts and the pay do not correlate (Student 48).*

Some students also indicated that they would not be among a ‘community of teachers’ or that work in long day care did not accord with their interests:

*I would possibly work in child care if I could choose who I worked with (other education professionals) and had the choice of pedagogical decisions—then it would compel me to work there (Student 23).*

*As I really want to work in interventions and with children who have disability my interest is not in child care (Student 4).*

Figure 4: Salience of structural factors as barriers and incentives to work in child care

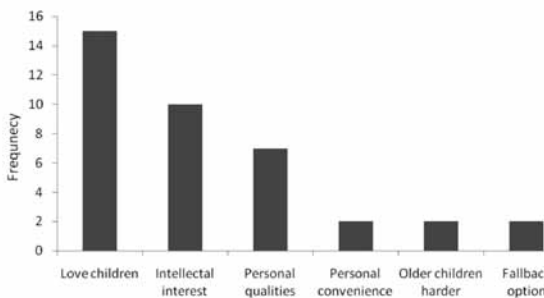


Figure 5: Barriers to working in child care: Qualitative account

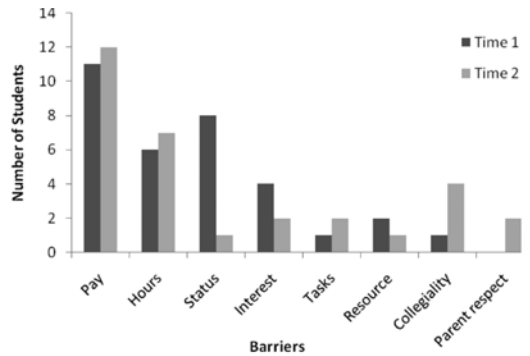
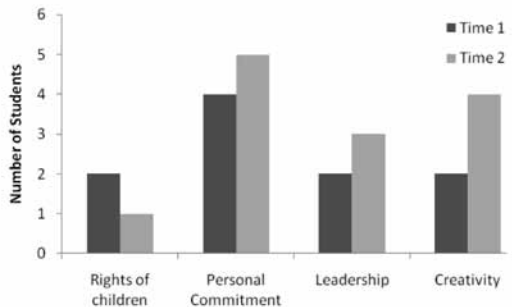


Figure 6: Incentives for working in child care



Two key themes emerged as incentives for working in child care: commitment (to the rights of the child and to early education) and personal opportunity (for leadership and creativity). These two broad themes were often combined. It was interesting to note that the number of responses relating to creativity and leadership increased at Time 2 when the students had experienced a practicum in a long day care setting:

*After prac I feel I want to work in child care because I feel I can make a difference and provide children with richer experiences (Student 4).*

*I loved it (working in child care)—listening to children’s thinking and planning from this. I enjoyed incorporating the arts—it was fun and engaging (Student 40).*

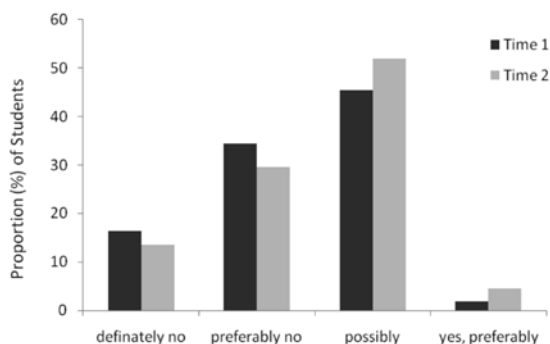
*I like the fact that you have control over how you run your room. Schools are not so open-ended (Student 41).*

**Question 4: What proportion of pre-service teachers would work, or consider working, in the childcare sector and what distinguishes them from those less willing?**



Figure 7 presents the responses to the question 'Would you consider working in centre-based long day care?' The results indicate that, at Time 1, while 16.7% would not consider this option and 35.2% would prefer alternative employment, just under half of the sample (48.9%) would consider working in child care. When asked Time 2, after practicum, there was a small but positive shift toward increased consideration of a childcare career option.

Figure 7: Response to question: Would you consider working in centre-based long day care?



Statistical analyses aimed to examine associations between the range of demographic, structural and attitudinal variables and the outcome variable, willingness to work in child care. Because there was so little demographic variability in the sample such associations could not be explored. There was also only limited variability in attitudinal variables (gender roles, attitudes to child care, family judgement). The association of these scores with a dichotomous variable, *willingness to work in child care*, were examined using independent t-test analyses in which groups were those less willing (definitely no and probably no) and those more willing (definitely yes and possibly) to consider child care. No significant differences were found on any of these analyses, probably reflecting small sample size and limited range of variability on attitudinal scores. Examination of structural factors similarly was limited by the small numbers and the largely homogenous response to many features of work in child care (pay and conditions) and did not yield statistically significant differences between those more and less willing to consider child care.

Qualitative data was analysed to identify any differences in text accounts that distinguished those willing and less willing to consider child care. A key feature to emerge from the comments of those willing to consider child care was the association with altruism: the placement of social advocacy and the needs of others above those of personal need. That is, those more willing to consider child care were no less concerned about the

pay conditions and status of child care than those who would not consider child care but were more motivated to overcome these barriers and forego personal gain. This was expressed both as professional commitment to leadership and desire to advocate for social change:

*I'm starting to feel compelled to work in child care as I think the field needs as many early childhood professionals and I could advocate for the field (Student 41).*

*Prior to starting my degree I worked in a long day care centre. I didn't realise how far off the mark we were until now. Eventually I would like to run my own GOOD-QUALITY centre. I think from working in the centre and seeing how I wouldn't like to run things and the skills and knowledge I have and am still gaining from this course, I could run a fantastic centre (Student 51).*

Those less willing were no less aware of the social value of child care but recognised that they did not have the personal or financial resources to consider this form of work with its attendant structural barriers:

*I understand that it will take early childhood education-trained teachers to change child care but I am not enthusiastic about changing it enough to make a difference ... (Student 47).*

*It's all about money. You go to uni for four years, come out with a \$16,000 debt to go to work for \$29,000 a year. I can earn more pulling beers at my local pub. I loved prac and could really see myself in child care but then reality hits (Student 42).*

## Discussion

Australia has recently witnessed change in the conceptualisation of the function of childcare provision, from one focused primarily on enabling parental participation in the workforce to one that also focuses on providing quality educational opportunities for all children. This shift has directed policy attention away from cost minimisation to an agenda of quality improvement (COAG, 2009b). The development of an *Early Years Learning Framework* (Australian Government, 2009), the purchase of 685 ABC Developmental Learning Centres by a not-for-profit consortium and the recent COAG undertaking to reduce staff ratios and improve the quality of provision in centres are all manifestations of this change. Central to the quality improvement agenda is the provision of a more highly trained childcare workforce. The current study aimed to assess the willingness of those training as degree level early childhood education specialists to work in the childcare sector.

Our study commenced by examining the demographic characteristics and beliefs of those undertaking a

degree in early childhood education. We examined the characteristics of a cohort of students in the third year of their degree because this was the year in which they undertook coursework focused specifically on child care, including a practicum in a childcare setting. Our data suggest that the cohort were a highly homogenous group who were almost entirely female and entering the degree from school completion. While the homogeneity of the cohort may raise concern and suggest the need to attract a more diverse population into early childhood education, our findings do not suggest that the population characteristics of our cohort were associated with negative belief systems about maternal work, negative judgements of child care, or unwillingness to consider entering the childcare workforce. The cohort held uniformly high non-traditional gender role attitudes and were largely positive about the role child care can play in the wellbeing of children and families. The scores on the Benefits and Costs of Maternal Employment (BCME) scale indicated that few judged the costs of maternal employment to be negative for the child. It is interesting to note that these findings contrast both with prior studies (Field & Varga, 1997; Hill & Veale, 1997) and with qualitative data from our pilot study (Ailwood & Boyd, 2007), in which first year students expressed more negative views. It is possible that changing socioeconomic contexts across the 13 years since two of these studies accounts for the contrast in student views. However this explanation is unlikely to hold for two cohorts within the same university conducted a year apart. The differences in our first- and third-year student cohorts are most likely the effects of student learning across the two years of study. Within the third year cohort there was some variability in scores on measures of the benefits of maternal employment for the child and qualified responses in accounts given of appropriate usage of child care. Their responses align with research literature that suggests that long hours of day care from early in life may be detrimental to the child (see Belsky, 2001). The conflict between the rights of children to obtain early education within a childcare setting and the concerns about variability of quality in the Australian context were evident in both quantitative data and qualitative accounts.

Although very few of the students expressed a preference for working in the childcare sector, approximately half of the cohort was willing to consider this option. The barriers to entering the childcare workforce almost entirely related to the pay and conditions of work. A few also identified absence of a community of like professionals and low status as important. These results are not surprising but are nevertheless key issues for policy-makers and professional organisations to consider, if highly qualified professionals are to be attracted to the field. Perhaps more interesting in our results are the reports of incentives for working in child care. Work in the prior-to-school sector was seen as less restrictive and affording opportunity

for creativity and innovation. The students who were willing to consider working in child care also saw the importance of the early years of life and the opportunity to lead and make a difference for children, families and society. These beliefs were evident among responses prior to the students' experience of practicum in child care, but increased in number following this experience. The students in the study cohort were taught, on campus, by highly experienced childcare leaders. Their input may account for increased understanding of the potential of quality child care to support children's learning and explain differences between our data and that at entry to first year (Ailwood and Boyd, 2007). Alongside this, those who had a positive practical experience of child care during their practicum placement were more likely to consider entering the childcare workforce. This finding accords with the previous report of Vajda (2005). There is indication in our data that, in preparing degree-level early childhood specialists, a positive practicum experience and exposure to explicit teaching and professional leadership in child care are influential. Such strategies warrant further specific study and documentation.

Our study presents the first account of the views of a cohort of students preparing to enter the early childhood workforce. We have examined the barriers and incentives to participate in the childcare sector within this single year cohort. Our study was limited by the relatively small sample size and cross-sectional design. There is a need to increase the body of evidence with larger sample sizes, perhaps sampled from a range of training institutions. Longitudinal tracking of students as they progress through their course and the influence of direct teaching, exposure to leadership models and practicum, needs explicit study. The cohort on whom this study reports were captured at a time of great change in early childhood education and care in Australia. At the commencement of their degree the students participating in this study were in a context, particularly in the State of Queensland, in which a single, profit-driven, corporate childcare provider monopolised the childcare sector. As they leave to enter the workforce the early childhood education and care landscape is changing. The significance of the experiences of birth to three-year-olds, supported by strong evidence from developmental science, is now receiving the acknowledgement for which early childhood professionals have long argued. That half the pre-service early childhood teachers would consider work in the childcare sector is a positive starting point. The challenge is to make it a preferred career option among graduating degree-level early education specialists.

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## Acknowledgements:

This research was funded by the Centre for Learning Innovation at QUT as part of a collaborative research grant and the Faculty of Health at QUT with funds provided to Professor Karen Thorpe. We wish to thank Sioban Laffey-Ardley for her work on data analysis and the participating students.