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Learner engagement under the ‘regulatory gaze’: Possibilities for re-positioning Early Childhood pre-service teachers as autonomous professionals

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Early Years: An International Research Journal

Authors: Jessie Jovanovic and Jennifer Fane, Flinders University

Abstract:

In a climate of increasing regulation within the early childhood education and care services (ECECS), and the greater re-positioning of professionals within public sectors, this article seeks to extend the literature surrounding risk and regulation in early childhood. In efforts to ‘push back’ against the ‘regulatory gaze’ in the ECECS, we investigate the role that learner engagement in initial teacher education can play in empowering early childhood pre-service teachers (PSTs) as professionals. This question is explored in the reporting of the findings from an action research study which redesigned a semester-long teacher education topic to draw on PSTs’ self-knowledge, applied experience and content choice, to go beyond the meeting of minimum credential requirements. Data were derived from sequential student evaluations and topic coordinators’ reflections and subsequent analysis highlights significant insights in relation to student teachers’ understanding of professionalism and their role within the ECECS. The implications of this re-positioning of PSTs’ developing sense of professionalism amidst increasing regulation are discussed.

Keywords:

Beck, Risk Theory, Professionalism, Learner engagement, Early childhood teacher education

It has been persuasively argued that contemporary early childhood education has experienced a deepening ‘regulatory gaze’, with significant research interest in the increasing disciplinary and governmental powers which construct policy, regulations, and standards for the profession (Grieshaber 2000; Miller 2008; Novinger and O’Brian 2003). Within liberal market economies generally, the role of government-led regulation is about maintaining a semblance of control under the guise of transparency and quality assurance to ensure consumer confidence and choice (Fenech, Giugni, and Bown 2012; Hoyle and Wallace 2007; Macfarlane and Lewis 2012). But under Beck’s (1986) notion of *Risk Society*, this paper argues that government regulation may be about containing risk, consequently rendering Early Childhood Education and Care Services’ (ECECS’) work as something that can be ordered and controlled. Order and control is impossible, however, because of the inevitability of change, the growing decay of social order and our increasing awareness of new knowledges in the second modernity of the 21st century (Cottle 1998; Jarvis 2007, 46; Matthewman 2015). As such, there is an urgent need to rethink the effects of this ‘regulatory gaze’ on how we perceive professionalism in ECECS.

A ‘regulatory gaze’ predicates a dominant construction of ‘professionalism’, which positions Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) as ‘technicists’; that is, individuals who apply their knowledge-to-practice in standardised, uniform ways as judged and evaluated by external criteria set for, not by, ECTs (Osgood 2006). This is distinct from what Osgood (2009) and Andrew and Newman (2012) call the ‘autonomous professional’, a commonly misunderstood and apolitical construct of ECT professionalism which is broadly defined as the acquisition of specialist knowledge/qualifications, including the ability to be emotionally-responsive, to self-regulate and to exercise high levels of autonomy.

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So just what effect does this management of risk mean for how the ECT is perceived and positioned in their Pre-Service Teacher (PST) training? Using Beck’s (1986) *Risk Theory*, this action research study will document how student teachers in an Australian ECECS teacher education topic were supported in reimagining themselves as autonomous professionals and in moving above and beyond the current ‘regulatory gaze’.

Positioning the Australian ‘regulatory gaze’ within the broader international context

The Council of Australian Government’s historic 2008 *Early Years Reform Agenda* heralded a significant early childhood policy shift in Australia. Signatories have brought about a series of federally-led legislative and regulatory requirements that seek to provide children with greater access to “High quality early childhood services [that] offer the productivity benefits of giving children the best possible start in life, and for parents, the opportunity to be active participants in the workforce or community life” (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 3–4). Australian ECECS, including preschools, long day childcare and family day care, must now comply with new requirements including:

- A National curriculum for birth-to-five-year-old children, the *Early Years Learning Framework*. The document is a learner-disposition framework focussing on who children are now (‘being’), their socio-emotional needs (‘belonging’) and the abilities and knowledge they will need for the future (‘becoming’) (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009);
- A series of national legislative requirements for children’s services’ operations which consist of the *Education and Care Services National Law* and the *Education and Care Services National Regulations*; and,
- A quality improvement assessment and rating system; the *National Quality Standard* which includes mechanisms for self-reflection at a service-level and external monitoring and rating by each state or territory’s arm of the newly established *Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)*.

Together they form the *National Quality Framework (NQF)*, deliberately blurring the boundaries between ‘education’ and ‘care’ in Australia (Early Childhood Development Sub-group of the Productivity Agenda Working Group 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2006). The NQF also heralded significant changes in qualification requirements, including the need for a minimum *Certificate III in Children’s Services* to work in ECECS and the need to have a registered ECT with a four-year teaching qualification in centres and preschools with 25 or more places for children per day (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority 2015).

Concurrently, Australian teachers in the primary and secondary education sectors have also seen a significant shift in their professional requirements. The formation of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was established in 2010 to provide national leadership for Australian states and territories to:

- Develop and maintain rigorous national professional standards for teachers and school leaders
- Foster and drive high-quality professional development for teachers and school leaders
- Work collaboratively across jurisdictions and engaging with key professional bodies (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2011b).

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A significant part of AITSL’s work thus centres on teacher quality and accreditation, leading a national approach to the monitoring and approval processes of PST education courses across the birth-to-five and K-12 sectors. Teacher registration continues to be administered by state-based boards and requires ECT courses to ‘prepare graduates to teach in both early childhood settings and primary schools’ (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2011a, 14).

Despite international policy definitions of early childhood education and care spanning the period from birth-to-eight years (Global Partnership for Education 2015; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2015), the continuing divide between ECECS and schooling in Australia mirrors that of a number of countries like the US, UK, Canada, Korea and the Netherlands. Their liberal market economies, focus on deregulation, and private provision has historical origins in a split system of governance that has seen the responsibility for ECECS divided among several ministerial portfolios and levels of government over time (Bennett 2011; Cochran 2011; Elliott 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2006). This care-education dichotomy results in an unequal distribution of resources, funding and professional regulations, and in a clear division of qualification requirements for the birth-to-five and K-12 sectors as evidenced in the Australian context above. The specific challenges for ECTs in qualifying for both sectors, and the increasing complexity and recognition of the importance of the work has necessitated a revitalisation of early childhood PST programmes. In response, literature suggests that such training must go beyond a ‘one size fits all’ approach or risk excluding or marginalising the professional knowledge, practice and philosophies of ECTs to bypass, align or replicate primary school teacher training (International Labour Organization 2012; Press, Wong, and Gibson 2015; Woodrow 2008). As such, there is an urgent need to reimagine teacher training in ECT courses and how these student teachers are positioned in their professional training, in light of the current ‘regulatory gaze’ that is shaping their professional and qualification requirements.

Using Beck’s Risk Theory to understand early childhood regulation in split-system governance

To appreciate how notions of risk affect ECECS and the training of ECTs, we first need to understand its catalyst - reflexive modernity. According to Beck (1992), observation of the conservative and religious facets of life originally offered groups of individuals a common structure, acting as the provider of meaning. As the culture of scientism and individualism deepened in the 20th century with better education, we witnessed a displacement of the industrial revolution’s manual worker society. This removal of historically-prescribed social forms and commitments, alongside the security, practical knowledge and guiding norms which it provided, has seen a new type of social commitment arise: control and surveillance (Bauman 2006; Beck 1992; Smeyers 2010).

This displacement has meant that our individual meanings and identities, which were once grounded in loyalty to employment-based and religious institutions and structures, are now becoming grounded in the self as the primary agent of meaning. Reflexive modernity is thus the pursuit of individual or personal freedom and development through new sets of structures and institutions; shaped by the information-age and corporatisation’s value of hierarchical organisation, professionalism, impersonal bureaucratization and strategic planning (Beck 1992). Its focus, in part, is to consider the prediction of outcomes and results in what is seen to be an increasingly uncertain future.

This uncertainty *in* and *to* modern society has led to greater social conflicts which have been treated as problems of risk rather than problems of order (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). As such, further ‘risks’ arise as a result of attempting to actively and rationally control the known risks or dangers affecting peoples’ lives (Krahmann 2011). Such risks, as purported by Krahmann (2011) can also

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arise from unknown dangers which are known (both in terms of likelihood of reoccurrence and consequence), can be predicted, or are unknown-unknowns (risks that are incalculable as they have never happened and are thus outside collective experience and based only on speculation). Despite their low probability, unknown-unknown risks often receive inordinate attention due to their possibly devastating consequences which increase the perception of their risk. Problematically, modern society’s focus on risk, and specifically unknown and unknown-unknown risk, suggests only what should not be done, rather than what should (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). As a result, research which has looked at the notion of risk in educational institutions and pedagogies suggests that, whether perceived or real, risk leads to fear. This then leads to social control via the domination of normalised discourses; or greater socio-political management of risk (that is, surveillance under the guise of ‘transparency’) (Kean 2005; Kline, Stewart, and Murphy 2006; Robinson 2005; Robinson 2008; Smeyers 2010). However, the resulting expansion and heightening of the intention of control ultimately ends up producing the opposite. The risk society’s demand to make human living situations rational, manufacturable or accountable results in the generation of uncertainty, ambivalence or alienation, rather than overcoming the initial risk issue (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Consequently, research on educational risks and control recommends that individuals need to challenge or question this social control by probing into and/or changing our current education paradigms, rather than attempting to overcome perceived risks.

Smeyers (2010) suggests that social control is sought through challenging the role of education and care, moving away from conservative customs, traditions and religions to ask “whose interests are we considering?” rather than “how should children be taught to live?” In this regard, Australia’s National Quality Framework (NQF) is not immune to this critique. Recent commentary on previous quality improvement mechanisms and new reforms suggests that a focus on control in ECECS has resulted in a mistrust of the practices of ECTs (Cooper 2011; Fenech and Sumsion 2007). With self-reflection and external auditing continuing to feature, these ‘quality’ controls are said to remain anchored in value-laden, maternal, and neoliberal discourses which do little to minimise risk (Barkham 2008; Bown, Sumsion, and Press 2011; Fenech et al. 2007), which fail to acknowledge the political and intellectual dimensions of ECECS (Hoyle and Wallace 2007; Manning-Morton 2006; Tayler 2011). In other words, regulation does not typically achieve its intended purpose and serves to discount the views of the ECTs in such policy debates about quality ECECS. This, then, is Beck’s (1992) case-in-point regarding risk, because as the Australian Government moves towards greater regulation and control over the sector, “risk assessment becomes, then, part of a set of attempts to render the world more manageable or at least to indicate on what basis to make decisions” (Beck, 1992, 1998 as cited in Jackson & Scott (1999, 89). As expressed cogently by Pellizzoni, “risk means, not catastrophe but anticipated catastrophe, potential danger. Risk society means: risk has come across the current stage of modernity” (2011, 4).

As discourses of risk permeate the ECECS, and have become a part of modernity, they have indelibly shaped both conceptions of children as perennially ‘at risk’, and the role which parents must now play as ‘choosing agents’ (Lupton 1999) to mitigate perceived risk. Situating parents and families as choosing agents necessitates increased regulation and ‘quality control’ in ECECS, ostensibly allowing for the mitigation and minimisation of risk for the consumer or choosing agent. In explicating the tension between the repositioning of parents as choosing agents and ECTS and others who work in ECECS, Le Grand (2003) offers a provocative metaphor in his work *‘Of knights and knaves, pawns and queens’* which explores motivation and agency in public policy and education and care services. As parents and families have been repositioned from service recipients who are to be content with the services on offer (pawns) to choosing agents whose demand drives the work and

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purview of services (queens), the role of ECTs has been similarly repositioned. As “unfettered user choice” (Le Grand 2003, 95) is inappropriate within education and care services, regulated choice becomes the necessary model and the ensuing ‘regulatory gaze’ that has followed has acted to reposition ECTs from autonomous professionals who are trusted to work in the best interest of the public (knights) to technicians who must be regulated to ensure that practice complies with external criteria (knaves).

With the re-positioning of the knight-to-knave and pawn-to-queen, and resulting regulation which stems from the perceptions of risk, researchers and academics working in early childhood teacher education have had to grapple with what professionalism looks like within a risk-society. We argue that in this process PSTs need to do more than simply meet a minimum level of technical competence (Berthelsen and Brownlee 2007; Crosswell and Beutel 2013; O’Connor et al. 2015). They also need to actively construct their own emerging sense of themselves pedagogically, relationally and in terms of their specialist expertise (Dalli 2008, 183; Osgood 2006). Here we present the work of an action research study which sought to examine how an early childhood teacher education topic re-positioned a ‘regulatory’ view of professionalism in ways that both empower student teachers, and exceed the minimum ‘professional’ and ‘quality’ standard imposed and monitored by the ‘regulatory gaze’.

Methodology

Research design

This article explores findings from a semester long teacher education topic which formed part of a larger action research study on student engagement (Jovanovic, Houston, and Ohly 2012; Jovanovic, Ohly, and Houston 2013). Specifically, it aimed to identify the effects of re-centring the topic’s focus on the learning needs of PSTs as a mechanism for developing their sense of engagement, self-knowledge and professionalism.

Seeing reality as a product of individual consciousness, and recognising that teaching knowledge is highly personal and subjective, an action research approach was used with the intent of further developing reflective practice in teacher education (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). Specifically, the study sought “... to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one does in everyday life” throughout the design, implementation, refinement and conclusion of the topic (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). The study design drew from Zuber-Skerritt’s (1996) *Emancipatory Action Research for Organisational Change* and McNiff’s (2013) *Eight-step Model for Action Research*; that is, plan, act, observe, reflect and repeat cyclically (as required). With the intent of being responsive (to the context and participant needs), emergent (subject approach to teaching and learning) and critically-reflective, the coordinator re-designed topic with the intent of accounting for PSTs’ previous experience of, confidence with, and continuing/emerging interests in the topic’s content.

Context

The early childhood teacher’s education topic under study is a required for the completion of a bachelor degree in early childhood education, which allows students to meet teacher regulation standards across a diverse range of early childhood education and care settings. The topic is entitled *Literacy and Numeracy Birth-to-Four* and ‘...examines the ways that infants and young children contribute to their social worlds as active participants in the interactions, language, ways of thinking, playing, and solving problems that form the basis of early literacy and numeracy competence.’¹ The teacher education topic aims to deepen students’ knowledge of young children’s cognitive-linguistic

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development and learning of literacy and numeracy concepts from developmental psychology, sociological and curriculum theory perspectives.

Participants

The participants in this study were a cohort of 80 students enrolled in an early childhood education four-year bachelor degree at a metropolitan Australian university. In addition, and fitting within the action research methodology employed, the topic coordinator and lead investigator was also a participant in the study.

Data collection

To gather detailed information about the impact of the topic’s redesign on learner engagement and students’ understandings of professionalism within ECECS, feedback was solicited from pre-service teachers at three points during the semester (commencement, mid-point, and completion) via the topic’s web portal, as well the final university topic evaluation. Students were asked to give feedback about the topic in response to structured questions in four key areas: students’ sense of engagement, their perspectives on the usefulness and applicability of the topic’s resources, the degree that personalisation and choice influenced their learning, and their on-going concerns about their learning and/or the topic. All student responses were anonymous. In addition, the topic coordinator and lead author of this article maintained a detailed teaching journal in which a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats (SWOT) frame was used to guide weekly reflections about the progression of the topic. Key operational, structural and intellectual aspirations, challenges and responses were detailed as part of this writing.

Analysis

Following the cyclical nature of action research, data from this sub-study were analysed in two phases of ‘reflection’. Data from the Early Childhood topic were initially analysed as it progressed across the semester. The purpose of this first phase of analysis was thus to understand and improve the topic’s personalised learning approach as it was being experienced by the students and topic co-ordinator throughout its 12-week duration. In doing so, analyses stayed close to two core action research values: (1) the prominent place the researcher has in the study, and (2) that purposeful, informed change is the desired endpoint (Hatch 2002). The second phase of data analysis considers both the topic co-ordinator/researcher’s *and* student teachers’ learning in the Early Childhood teacher education topic, underpinned by the analytical frames of Le Grand’s (2003) *Motivation, Agency, and Public Policy: Of knights and knaves, pawns and queens* and Beck’s Risk Theory. Student and topic co-ordinator data were analysed for patterns, looking both for recurrences, associations and sequences that suggested a common learner/subject coordinator experience (of the teacher education topic), and for outposts, absences and contradictions that may provide a more complete account of the topic as it was experienced (MacNaughton and Hughes 2008, 180–181).

Findings: Learner engagement to support the personal-as-the-professional

Building upon the work of Smith (2006 as cited in Thompson, 2010, pp. 77-78), the findings are presented comparatively as ‘The Realist Tale’ (PSTs view) and ‘The Confessional Tale’ (the topic coordinator’s view). This approach to reflexive qualitative research writing offers two ways to position the researcher in the presentation of the findings. The realist tale offers an impersonal, unbiased account of the PSTs’ experiences of personalised learning in the topic (Thompson 2010). In contrast, the confessional tale reveals the successes, tensions and dilemmas that emerged during the research, and explicates the researcher’s understandings of the ways personalised learning transformed the students’ thinking about their professional work during the research process. The

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findings are presented in the following three thematic categories according to the MacNaughton and Hughes (2008) action research analysis framework: associations, contradictions, and reoccurrences.

Associations: Uncertainty and re-positioning

Realist tale (PSTs' Views)

PSTs initially showed specific interest in the online content, videos, collaboration and discussion that might be possible within the ongoing Community of Practice (CoP) assessment task. For example, student feedback about 'resources' and 'choice' at the beginning of the topic noted the possibilities the assessment might afford them:

*"A lot of examples and opportunity to exchange examples, ideas and concepts with classmates."
"Having to find our own websites that we can share is really great. [providing] online resources like approved website with information, examples and guides."*

At the mid-point of the topic, the 'feel' of a community of learners is discussed, as students noted the connection between the CoP assessment and the support it was offering their learning:

"Finding our own resources to share really makes you come across things that are helpful that you wouldn't have ordinarily come across. Having seen some resources that people have posted are awesome. Some are so great. It has really broadened my knowledge"

There were mixed feelings about this assessment by the end of the semester, however. Some clearly valued its approach in combination with the topic's pedagogy:

"CoPs - I have learnt a lot from what other peers in my subject had found surrounding literacy and numeracy in Early Childhood settings."

Others clearly indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the frequency and breadth of the CoP posts from peers:

"Having to do the CoP submissions has required a lot of searching for suitable material to post, but having so many people post so much information has resulted in 'information overload' and I haven't been able to keep up with watching all the clips and reading all the documents posted to see if they are useful or not."

But the emergent, personalised approach to

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator's Views)

My initial journal entries show the strengths in the closer constructive alignment between content, outcomes and assessment when PSTs were repositioned as professionals who were encouraged to take risks to openly share their learning collegially with peers:

*"I feel like I have truly simplified the subject's assessment for the first time in years, by tying the readings, workshop tool and 'sharing/collaborative' intent into the two streams of assessment."
"Having just completed marking assignment tasks (CoPs & blog posts), I feel like this is the closest I've ever come to designing assessment that actually measures students' understandings of subject content and progress towards the outcomes with any degree of accuracy."*

But like the PSTs, I began to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of posts with each student (of 80 total) posting weekly. Consequently, the assessment's pedagogical intent seemed to become lost:

"The CoP posts have literally exploded, and I know if I'm feeling fatigued about the sheer number of posts, links and discussion starters, then so will the students. Clearly this volume of information is too much to be meaningful now for student learning and/or fostering a sense of community across the workshop groups (as a cooperative collective). So how much would be enough? And would having less but with more depth actually be of benefit to student learning in the long run?"

By the completion of topic, my journal entries illustrated how I was attempting to rationalise the mixed feedback I was receiving about the CoP assessment tasks, in particular:

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Realist tale (PSTs’ Views)

assessment for learning in the topic, more broadly, featured strongly in the Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) survey:

“I liked that we had assessment things to do regularly throughout the subject rather than at the end. I loved the fact that was specifically for B-4-year-olds. I liked watching CoP videos of children and then unpacking that [with peers].”

“The assessment work helped me to further my learning, especially having to read readings to support the assignments.”

Overall, there was a median response of 4/5 that the assessment both aligned with the topic’s learning objectives and that it enhanced their learning.

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator’s Views)

“... students said they were literally drowning in posts that were now being done just for the sake of it. The sense of community that was fostered initially was lost ... This was perhaps, in part, a representation of the stress and angst my students reported feeling as the semester was drawing to a close, but it feels more than a niggle of this nature.”

“But whilst some have noted that they’d prefer to be told what to do, and prefer more structure than choice (with the assessment because its ‘overwhelming’), an equal number have discussed how much they have appreciated the sense that they could personalise the subject to their specific learner needs; that this became the focus of all that they did in the subject because this philosophy and approach was made clear from the start of the subject.”

And as I reflect on my journaling about the assessment in the topic, I think there’s an important distinction to be made here. PSTs studying the topic were beginning to see how their assessment supported their learning, distinct from the inundation of posts they needed to traverse at a practical level. But what if this sense of feeling ‘overwhelmed’ was symptomatic of exponential growth in their own self-knowledge; that is, acknowledgement of the challenges they faced in critically and purposefully filtering the wealth of knowledge and resources being posted for their CoPs?

Contradictions: Tensions within risk taking

Realist tale (PSTs’ Views)

Feedback from PSTs at the beginning of the topic indicated that they valued the degree of personal choice offered within the topic’s reading pathways, flexibility in assessment, and various avenues for connecting to topic content. Their comments, however, were typically buffered by coordinating conjunctions that indicated exceptions to their statements about valuing choice:

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator’s Views)

Across its duration, I too clearly present some contradictions in my thinking about the topic, noting my own highs and disappointments about how personalised learning (or choice) influenced my pedagogical approach over time. This is perhaps most prevalent in my final reflections on the topic, as a whole:

Pushing back: the potential of learner engagement as a strategy to re-position professionalism within a 'risk-society'

Realist tale (PSTs' Views)

*"I think it is **valuable** [to have choice], **however** I feel as though the educators will know more about the importance of what they teach us [in order to have a clear grasp and understanding [of the subject]]."*

*"I really **value** these choices as everyone has different learning preferences. I do believe that **sometimes** the choices can be far too broad that students don't know where to start or what to do at all."*

*"I think it [choice] is **valuable to a point**. I like my learning a little more **structured** so that I have **choice**, but I know what I'm doing at the same time."*

This metacognitive awareness of what they said best supported their learning was an early indication of their increasing sense of self-knowledge about themselves as professionals and learners. Feedback at both the mid- and end-points of the topic suggested that PSTs had gained a much richer sense of their personal and professional learning needs:

*"Concerns surrounding the broad nature of the subject have been addressed through the discussion of independent learning; **however** my concerns about myself not covering adequate information have not resolved (no necessarily a bad thing!)."*

*"I have found having the **luxury** of not being told what readings to read in order to answer the weekly readings was something I **struggled** with a lot. I suppose this made me realise the type of learner I am, and perhaps I need to work on being more of an independent learner – so therefore, this subject allowed me to do this and took me outside of my comfort zone."*

*"Yes, having choice between 3 pathways made readings more interesting and **helped with completing the readings** because it is more about which way you learn best and what interests you. For me, I **don't work well with finding my own readings**. I like being allocated readings but everyone's different. It made it student-based, and worked to how we thought [the subject] worked best."*

Their comments were clearly shrouded in self-doubts about their learning and progress, and the potential loss of opportunities to learn given their preferred learning styles. This contrast in their experiences of, and feelings about, personalised learning through choice is perhaps best evident in the SET survey about the topic. Only half of the cohort believed that "I had a clear idea what was expected of me" (median response 2.5/5), yet there was a high median

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator's Views)

I confess to feeling more than a little disappointed, too, with the students' feedback on the subject. Rather than looking back with careful reflection on what the subject has been able to achieve, students were quick to highlight how pointless the use of technology had been for their learning and assessment work, and their lack of understanding re: choice/personalisation in the subject design. I clearly need to better explain my philosophy behind the subject design and use of technologies (there is much room for improvement with the tool selections, though), and I need to think through how the 'pathways' approach [to readings] could better support the lines of assessment, content, and readings students access in the subject in 2015 (including the usefulness of the 4 resources model that has framed the subject successfully and with a high level of student satisfaction in SETs since 2011."

Retrospectively however, the concerns PSTs raised about their experiences of the topic were practically-based (e.g. how technology-based tools (discussion boards, blogs, FLO Live sessions) had not enhanced their learning), rather than being fundamentally concerned about the philosophical and pedagogical intentions of the topic in its design and approach. The thought, care and risk-taking the teaching team and I undertook to re-centre our teaching around learner needs' was noted, albeit briefly, in my reflective writing:

"By far the biggest strength that has been brought to the subject in 2014 is the teaching team's willingness to take risks, and to focus on using an emergent, learner-centred approach to our presentation of subject content and assessment work, interspersed this year with some intentional teaching regarding the selection/critique/creation of learning resources and environments that we felt was a weakness with our approach in previous iterations of the subject."

Despite our attempts and willingness to model taking risks in our own topic teaching, this pedagogical approach was not sufficiently personalised to reflect or connect with the PSTs' perceived learning needs. This was evident in how the students saw there was value in the modelled approach, but did not see the benefit it could offer their own professional learning.

Pushing back: the potential of learner engagement as a strategy to re-position professionalism within a 'risk-society'

Realist tale (PSTs' Views)

response of 4/5 that "The topic responded to my learning needs".

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator's Views)

Thus, the tension between perceived and actual value of personalised learning and risk-taking illustrates PSTs' struggle to move from concerns about the technical aspects of their practice to thinking more holistically about themselves as professionals beyond simply their work in teaching young children.

Reoccurrences: Shifting understandings

Realist tale (PSTs' Views)

At the outset, PSTs reported that they were primarily concerned about the more technical aspects of 'the what' and 'the how' of teaching literacy and numeracy to very young children. When asked about what they were most interested in learning, typical replies included:

"What literacy and numeracy entails as I am not familiar with these at the moment."

"How to most effectively teach literacy and numeracy in early childhood."

A shift in their thinking began to emerge during the course of the topic, as students articulated some of the key professional knowledge, skills and practices they were beginning to note through their learning. Broadly, this centred around two key strands. First, their understandings of the capabilities of infants and toddlers was expanding, even if PSTs experienced difficulties in articulating this learning with discipline-specific accuracy:

"Babies are constantly learning literacy and numeracy!"

"The most interesting thing I have learnt in this subject so far is that babies can actually count and comprehend numerical logic even if they don't physically count out loud."

"Just what is involved in literacy and numeracy for really young children. I had never considered what they actually learn at that age before, and I have found it really fascinating and informative."

Second, PSTs' thinking about their professional learning extended to consider the role that the purposeful documentation of literacy and numeracy learning can play in their planning for teaching:

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator's Views)

While the teaching team noted shifts in PSTs' understandings of infants' and toddlers' literacy and numeracy capabilities, and the role that purposeful documentation of learning can play in their planning for teaching, their comments in our final workshops indicated concern about how to articulate these understandings in the final assessment task (a teaching philosophy statement):

"Students reportedly felt that, in being asked to write a teaching philosophy statement pertaining to literacy and numeracy B-4 teaching, they had not been adequately prepared. In essence, they complained that at no point in the subject had we taught educational philosophy, clear teaching techniques or observational strategies."

At the time I felt quite defensive about why they felt unequipped to attempt the final assessment task, given that we saw such strong evidence of a shift towards critical thinking about literacy and numeracy pedagogy as a part of their professional practices with the infant/toddler age-group:

"I must admit that I got quite defensive at this point, and I attempted to explain the fortnightly module approach of observing (week 1) and then planning (week 2). I also highlighted the numerous references we'd made back to texts like MacNaughton and William's (2009) Techniques for Teaching Young Children and van Hoorn's (2014) Play at the Center of the Curriculum in our discussions about the role of the educator in planning for and responding to young children's learning needs and interests (including when it may be appropriate to plan for intentional teaching moments/strategies)."

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Realist tale (PSTs' Views)

The most important thing I have learnt so far in this subject is how powerful attentive observation can be. Prior to this class I had not focused on breaking down observations before."

"How to analyse children's learning and recognising learning can occur from the simplest activity or experience."

By the end of the topic the above manifested into a much greater sense of themselves as professionals, as the students reflected on their shifting understandings of very young children's literacy and numeracy learning, and their role in supporting and encouraging such learning:

"This subject has given me great insight into numeracy and literacy in the early years. Prior to this subject, I wasn't aware of all the learning that takes place in the early years. I will now take [sic] greater understanding into the teaching of the importance of scaffolding and providing meaningful learning extensions. Not only do I have a greater awareness of children's literacy and numeracy engagement, but also how to draw out literacy and numeracy dimensions from resources, teaching materials, learning experiences and lesson plans."

"Not sure if it is specific to the subject content, but I feel that I have become a little more open-minded to what learning looks like and what children are capable of. This reflects in my attitude that literacy and numeracy can be present within and studied in many different ways."

Importantly, PST knowledge and confidence appeared to grow out of their learning in the topic, with a strong consensus in the SET survey data that "I developed an understanding of evidence-based practice" (median response 4/5).

Confessional tale (Subject Coordinator's Views)

It seemed as though the students were anxious or uncertain about how to articulate their technical knowledge and skills in the final assessment, rather than demonstrating how their professional learning has impacted on their evolving teaching philosophy.

Specifically, they appeared to have difficulty in translating their [now] critical perspectives on teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy with infants and toddlers into a statement that reflected their professional learning in the topic. In part this could be because the teaching team were unable to provide fortnightly feedback, as was originally intended in the design of the topic:

"Students felt they were preparing their final summative critical practice posts 'in the dark', having received 'vague' feedback about how they were progressing with their 4 formative tasks. Unfortunately we could not guarantee feedback and marks more than at two points in the semester (as the two other tutors in the subject work in other jobs too) and it would have been an equity issue to disclose more. I take their point that if we design formative assessment work, they should be able to access feedback more regularly, especially considering many did not do well in the first submission."

But more importantly, a twelve-week long topic was not sufficient exposure for PSTs to confidently express how their learning in the topic repositioned them as critical professionals rather than early childhood technicians when considering the teaching of infant and toddler literacy and numeracy. This resulted in their preference for an assessment task that focussed on the documentation of their technical knowledge and learning, rather than a demonstration of their broadening understandings of their professional practice in relation to the topic content.

Implications: Questioning the role of initial teacher education

The proceeding discussion investigates why PSTs may struggle with problems of 'order' rather than engaging with problems of 'risk' in their work as emerging ECTs. Here we apply our earlier discussion of Beck's work to discuss and contextualise these findings and their implications for those working in early childhood teacher education.

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Uncertainty

Subject evaluations clearly highlighted student teachers’ reported discomfort with the topic’s approach to content delivery and assessment that intended to personalise learning and enhance learner engagement. The Community of Practice (CoP) assessment, for instance, necessitated that PSTs take responsibility for creating a community of learners *themselves*; a risk that necessitated ‘putting themselves out there’ to demonstrate and share with their peers their burgeoning knowledge and professional engagement with the topic content. The topic coordinator was also re-positioned from the historically prescribed role of ‘teacher’ or ‘subject authority’, to that of a ‘facilitator’ or ‘mentor’ (Bauman 2006; Smeyers 2010). Consequently, students attempted to mitigate this uncertainty in their own professional learning by initially pursuing ‘order’ through the seeking of concrete technicist knowledge and credentialist skills, before gradually beginning to take risks with their own learning to examine their developing sense of themselves as autonomous, self-regulating, collaborative professionals (Manning-Morton, 2006; Osgood, 2006, 2010). This tension prevails in the PSTs’ final reflections on the topic, as some indicated feeling overwhelmed by the frequency and depth of the assessment work, whilst others saw its value in relation to the broader pedagogy of the topic.

Commencing the topic with the learner at the forefront thus echoes Beck’s (1992) commentary on reflexive modernity; that is, the more we experience uncertainty in modern times, the more we come to focus on the self as the primary agent of meaning. As such, the topic coordinator’s use of choice offered students an opportunity to become a ‘choosing agent’ (Lupton 1999) with professional ‘ground-up’ knowledge and competencies that would enable them to both understand the current ‘regulatory gaze’ and reposition themselves as actors within the ECECS (Grieshaber 2000; Novinger and O’Brian 2003; Miller 2008). Giving students responsibility, agency and choice over a 12-week initial teacher education topic, however, did not mean that they seamlessly assumed a more professional approach to their work with young children, or to their thinking about early childhood teaching. Nevertheless, it did provide a way in which the topic coordinator can potentially disrupt the ‘technicist’ positioning of PSTs working in the local ECECS context.

Contradictions

Clear contradictions in the PSTs’ valuing of risk in their professional learning were also evident in their topic evaluations and feedback. For example, student teachers expressed a preference for prescriptive instruction and specific direction on the assessment tasks, and wanted to know what to read/look for, when confronted with varying pathways for accessing topic content and readings. Topic coordinator journal entries revealed that our attempts to model a professional, reflexive approach to the topic content went unnoticed by students. Yet, their topic evaluations consistently noted that they valued opportunities for choice in their learning. This valuing of choice and autonomy during their initial teacher education studies epitomises Le Grand’s (2003) notion of ‘knights’ *and* ‘knaves’ and the tension between these two constructions.

In other words, whilst these PSTs were searching for prescriptive technicist information on which to predicate their practice (knave positioning), the unintended consequence of the topic’s focus on learner engagement and personalisation was that the coordinator positioned the student teachers as increasingly ‘autonomous beings’ who can have a degree of control over their own learning (queen positioning). A substantial shift in PSTs own metacognitive awareness, both in relation to the topic content and their own learning about themselves as professionals was evident as a result. As such, these findings provide some preliminary evidence that instead of mistrusting the practices of ECTs and using ‘quality assurance’ as a mechanism for social control (Fenech and Sumsion 2007; Hoyle and Wallace 2007; Osgood 2009; Smeyers 2010), initial teacher education has an important role to play in supporting our PSTs to begin repositioning themselves as ‘knights’ in a market economy that

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permits parents and families to exercise choice. Taking Osgood’s (2006) view of the autonomous professional who questions and reflects on current ECECS discourse, topic coordinators need to support student teachers to question what ‘professionalism’ could and should look like within a ‘risk society’. This critical orientation allows for reflexive examination of the role of ECTs, offering a fundamentally different conceptualisation of how young children and families can be given greater opportunities for agency in their own education and care needs and interests over time through increased autonomy and professionalism of ECTs (as knights), rather than through increased regulation (as knaves).

Shifts

PSTs indicated a clear preference for technicist learning at the outset and during the midpoint of the topic, through language such as ‘what is’ literacy and numeracy and ‘how’ is it most ‘effectively’ taught. However, shifts in their understanding of their role in identifying, engaging, and responding to young children’s literacy and numeracy development was evident in the final round of student feedback where PSTs described the fluidity of these concepts and the need for ECTs to be open to understanding that meaningful engagement with literacy and numeracy is hampered by easily quantifiable and technicist approaches. Here we see the shifts in students’ thinking and learning from wanting technicist information and skills to increasingly viewing themselves as autonomous professionals capable of supporting young children’s literacy and numeracy development in a variety of ways. Despite the PSTs’ valuation of this learning however, they struggled to translate this increased professionalism in their final assessment piece and voiced concern over their lack of specific preparation for a statement of their emerging teaching philosophy and preference for demonstrating their learning in more technicist and credentialist ways. This finding is in keeping with previous research into PSTs’ thinking about their professional role in ECECS and teacher education courses (Berthelsen and Brownlee 2007; Crosswell and Beutel 2013; O’Connor et al. 2015).

In these shifts, the tension between what PSTs feel are the necessary technicist skills and knowledge they want to have, and the increasing valuation they gave to being positioned as autonomous professionals, is evident. As identified earlier, this tension is exacerbated through the increased surveillance through the regulatory requirements and ‘tick boxes’ that ECTs more broadly need to meet in order to avoid known, unknown, and unknown-unknown risks. As student teachers regularly witness these regulatory requirements on placement and (in many cases) during paid work before and/or during their teacher education study, they appear to mirror this risk aversion in their own learning through attempts to render their world more manageable (Beck 1992; Beck 1999), through mitigation of the perceived risks in autonomous learning despite the value they may find in it. This aversion to taking risks (real or perceived) in their learning and preference for prescriptive learning and assessment reflects Pellizzoni’s (2011) concept of ‘anticipated catastrophe’, motivated by the mitigation of risk, no matter how implausible potential risks may be. Regardless of the topic’s assessment structure in preparing students to write a teaching philosophy statement (such as fortnightly critical practice blog posts where PSTs engage in reflective praxis about their learning from the standpoint of an EC professional), student teachers across the cohort indicated consistent and concerted worry and apprehension concerning the task. Despite acknowledging the value of autonomous and self-regulated learning, they were not yet ready to trust in their professional learning as ‘correct’ or ‘sufficient’ in the face of the credentialist and ‘quality’ focused frameworks that they viewed as beneficial and necessary due to their pervasiveness in the ECECS.

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Conclusion

When the topic coordinator focussed on the personal-as-the-professional (Manning-Morton 2006; Osgood 2006), students went above and beyond the technical aspects of their literacy and numeracy work with young children - moving beyond the minimum requirements of the ‘regulatory gaze’. Currently teacher education in Australia works within the bounds of the *National Quality Framework* and the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, compelling PSTs to demonstrate their ‘credentialism’ (essential knowledge and skills) as defined by external monitoring bodies like ACECQA and teacher-registration bodies. The findings of this action research study indicate, however, that the positioning of PSTs as autonomous professionals rather than technicians allowed them not only to demonstrate the competencies and skills required to meet regulatory requirements, but in addition, gave opportunities for deep learning and meaningful reflection on the role of the ECT in young children’s learning. We argue that it is through continued challenge and resistance to the idea of the ECT as a technician that early childhood teacher education may be able to push back, to re-focus our work on *what should be done* in ECECS as a problem of order, not risk (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994).

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ⁱ Taken from the topic syllabus in 2014.