



Professional Learning

A strengthening and reinvigorating element of the early childhood profession

By Zsuzsa Millei and Linda Newman,
The University of Newcastle

It is recognised in many professions that ongoing learning is essential to keep abreast with developments within one's profession. Early childhood teaching is no exception. The New National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education highlights the importance of professional development and prescribes that early childhood settings should devise plans and implement those. Many professions mandate regular updating of qualifications. The NSW Institute of Teachers in its Professional Teaching Standards has four stages of teacher competence and each explicitly entails professional learning. These are Graduate Teacher; Professional Competence; Professional Accomplishment; and Professional Leadership (<http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/>). The Institute points out that ongoing professional learning is at the heart of teacher professionalism and leads to improved student learning.

The Early Years Learning Framework also endorses the need for ongoing professional learning within Principle 5. "Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice" where educators are encouraged to "seek ways to build their professional knowledge" and engage in "a lively culture of professional inquiry" (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 13). There is also a professional learning program offered for educators (<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfp/>).

For us to continue to grow in strength and credibility as a profession, it is important to engage in ongoing learning. Peter Moss (2006) advocates for early childhood workers to be researchers, instead of 'substitute mothers' or 'technicians'. He urges us to continuously seek deeper understanding and new knowledge, for us to be learners and do research as part of our everyday practice, to be reflective and dialogic practitioners (2007, pp. 36-37).

Further study – joining the community of scholars

One way to enrich one's professional life and embrace new challenges is to engage in further formal study. In doing this you will become part of a community of scholars operating within a learning community or community of practice. With this group you will gain access to the latest thinking and research, resources and networks. By joining a group of people with similar work and scholarly interests you will be able to engage in collaborative thinking and reflection, share and test your ideas with others and research your ideas in practical ways to change your working environment and practices together with and for the benefit of children and families as well as yourself and colleagues. A learner in this learning community will collaborate towards co-constructing knowledge in relationship with others (peers, colleagues, children and families) and “also with theories, concepts and analyses from many different fields; in short, through frequent border crossing” (Moss, 2007, p. 36). Learning community members engage in dialogue, - a process of transformation, and listening, - to be open to others: children and adults without making them “the same as us” (Rinaldi, 2005).

The strong international body of research in early childhood education offers abundant opportunities for professionals to create a nexus between research and practice. By taking part in formal and informal research, “through critical reflection, teachers construct and reconstruct new practices”, thus contribute to the existing body of research (Blaise, 2006, p. 105). As an active learner/researcher you will further improve the ability to articulate your practice to others – the why and the how of your work. Moreover, early childhood teachers reported in Jenny Overton's study (2009, p. 6) that “learning/professional development had contributed to their sense of empowerment and professional self-worth. Knowledge, or more particularly, being seen to have further knowledge, was equated [by them] with power for speaking up and confidence” in one's profession.





The Master of Early Childhood Education at The University of Newcastle

At The University of Newcastle the new Master of Early Childhood Education (MECE) has an innovative inquiry based approach that enmeshes practical knowledge and theories. It has adopted the understanding of teachers as researchers in their own practice. The program builds on and extends already acquired professional knowledges and skills by continuously and critically reflecting on participants' practices. The suite of early childhood courses covers areas such as contemporary ways of looking at, and inquiring about childhood and early childhood education (philosophies, methods and theories), contemporary issues, becoming a teacher researcher, diversity and rethinking literacies. MECE has also been designed to allow people to gain an additional specialisation within the early childhood degree. You can graduate with a major in a range of interesting options by selecting 4 of your 8 courses from the suite of courses in a specialist area, such as early childhood intervention, educational leadership, comparative education, Information Communication Technology, literacy, social justice, Aboriginal education, creative and performing arts, or many more.

MECE accommodates people who wish to extend their three or four year teaching degree with a postgraduate degree. Students who enrol can start with just one course if this suits them. There are eight courses required to graduate with a MECE. Classes are held in the evenings, and many have flexible study arrangements with some online learning involved. If you have not studied for a while, support is available through the library (using electronic databases, searching the library etc.) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning (essay writing, critical thinking etc.). The early childhood classes are small groups, so you will have close contact with your peers and lecturers.

To find out more

For more information go to <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/program/10934.html> or get in touch with Associate Professor Linda Newman (programme convenor) at Linda.Newman@newcastle.edu.au or on 4961 3632. Mid year entry will be available in 2011.

References:

- Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Retrieved July 3, 2009. from http://www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy_agenda/quality/pages/earlyyearslearningframework.aspx
- Blaise, M. (2006). Teachers as theory makers. In G. Latham et al. (2006). *Learning to teach: New times, new practices*. pp. 96-138. South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Moss, P. (2006). Structures, understandings and discourses: Possibilities for re-envisioning the early childhood worker. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 7(1), 30-41.
- New South Wales Institute of Teachers. (2005). Professional Teaching Standards. Retrieved March 17, 2011 from <http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/>.
- Overton, J. (2009). Early childhood teachers in context of power: Empowerment and voice. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34(2), 1-10.
- Rinaldi, C. (2005) *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

www.newcastle.edu.au