Early Childhood Education: A Moral Concern

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Abstract
This paper is based on the premise that early childhood education is a moral concern because of the way in which values are central to all of its endeavours. In the doctoral study discussed in this paper, conceptual analysis based on meta-ethical theory was adopted in order to identify the values embodied or intended in the Australian Early Childhood Association Code of Ethics (1990) and the philosophies of early childhood education which were developed by a cohort of early childhood student teachers. A comparison and contrast between the publicly articulated values and the personal value commitments is made. Findings from this research confirm the importance of clarifying the values embedded in early childhood philosophy and pedagogy in order to provide a moral lens through which we can examine the profession and its work with children and families. A discourse based on the moral nature of our work is essential in order to present an alternative perspective to the discourse which promulgates education as a value-neutral, value free, or value relative activity.

Introduction
Currently in Australia different accounts of early childhood education can be identified. One account, which can be found in much of the discourse that surrounds government policies, conceptualises early childhood education as an "enterprise" or "industry". This value position presents a limited vision of early childhood education and its value to a democratic society. The use by government of the term "children's services industry" to describe programmes and services for young children and their families is indicative of the notion of education as an instrumental activity rather than education as a right of citizenship. A further account of early childhood education is that which is evident in the discourse of postmodernism, where the notions of multiple perspectives, the significance of contexts and the subjectivity of positions are privileged. While this discourse has raised our consciousness of the need to recognise and respond to the irretrievable transformations that are occurring in contemporary circumstances (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), the postmodern account makes the notion of shared understandings and commitments difficult because of its acceptance of relativity.
and subjectivity in value positions (Crittenden, 1996). Unless there is shared understanding concerned with core values and commitments there can be no basis for rejecting policies or practices which demean, exploit or harm children in the name of education (Fleer & Kennedy, 2000).

Another account, although it seems less recognised, is one which acknowledges that early childhood education is a moral concern because of its ineliminable link with values. As Kessler (1991), summarising the philosophical discussions in early childhood education, argues:

> What appears to be a debate between those who are well informed by the current research in child development and those who are not is, in reality, a debate between individuals who hold different values about the purposes of schooling, what counts as legitimate knowledge, and presumably the nature of the good life and just society. (p. 193)

The debates referred to by Kessler are grounded in value positions which commit individuals and institutions to different types of action and activity. The dominance of the instrumental, enterprise, and value relativity positions in Australian early childhood education seem to have overwhelmed the opportunity for philosophical discussion on the moral nature of early childhood education. The ideas discussed in this paper are derived from a doctoral study which is based on a belief that values are central to the decisions made by early childhood professionals and to their relationships with children, families and colleagues. The centrality of values to these decisions and relationships confirms for me that early childhood education is a moral concern.

The paper provides an overview of the study design, identification of the contexts surrounding the key site of analysis, and a discussion of some of the methodological issues and of the key findings.

**Overview of the Study Design**

The tension involved in the different accounts of early childhood education outlined above, the outcomes which derive from these positions, and my commitment to the notion of early childhood education as a moral concern, provided the context for the development of my key research questions: “What is the nature and origin of the values underpinning early childhood education in Australia?” and, “Where would I find them?”

In order to determine the nature and origin of the values underpinning Australian early childhood education I selected two sites for analysis. The first site is the nationally adopted Australian Early Childhood Association’s (AECA) *Code of Ethics* (1990) which I believe provides a coherent account of the profession’s values. In the second site, these publicly articulated values are compared and contrasted with the individually held professional values which were developed by a cohort of early childhood student teachers. By contrasting and comparing the public values with the personal value commitments I sought to identify,
illuminated and interpret the nature and origin of the values which are embodied or intended in the two sets of documents. The study has four major components which are outlined below.

The study is contextualised through an examination of the literature in four arenas. First, the philosophy of education literature concerned with the notion of education as a moral concern is reviewed. The work of Peters (1966, 1973) and Dewey (1933, 1938) among others, is examined in this arena. Second, I reviewed the literature which discusses the major philosophical traditions of early childhood education in order to identify the core values inherent in each tradition. In the third area of the literature review, the role of values in teacher socialisation research is examined. The literature on codes of ethics and its perceived link with professionalism is discussed in the final section of the literature review. The literature review helps to support the analyses of both the Code of Ethics and the student teachers' philosophies.

The second component of the study is an examination of the AECA Code of Ethics using the principles of conceptual analysis based on meta-ethical theory (Peters 1966), in order to determine the nature and the origin of the values embodied or intended in the document. This analysis is undertaken in three stages or phases which begin with the actual text of the Code, and then proceed to the categorisation of themes within the principles and finally to the identification of the core values underpinning the themes. Links are made between the various philosophical traditions discussed in the literature review, the identified themes and the values embedded in them. The analysis also reveals the way in which certain values are privileged over others, as well as what I term 'silences' in the Code on those aspects of early childhood education, reference to which might be expected in the document, but which are not evident. For example, the AECA Code, unlike some professional codes such as the Standards Council of the Teaching Profession Code of Practice (1999) in Australia, does not specifically articulate values concerned with early childhood professional or personal qualities. In addition to the analysis of the Code, I interviewed two members of the Working Party which was responsible for the writing of the document. These interviews assisted in my understanding of the processes involved in the document's development as well as providing further insights into the nature of the values that underpin the principles.

The third component of the study involved an analysis of philosophies of early childhood education that were written by a cohort of early childhood student teachers prior to their graduation. This analysis was undertaken in three stages. The first stage identified the key biographical features and the similarities and differences between these contexts. In stage two I sought to identify and categorise the key themes that emerged from the philosophies. In the final stage of analysis, the data from the analysis of the Code of Ethics were compared and contrasted with the findings from the analysis of the student teachers' philosophies. In addition to the analysis of the philosophies, I interviewed four of the authors in the second year following their graduation in order to enrich my
understanding of the values they had committed to in their philosophies. These interviews also gave me insight into the way that values are challenged, altered or confirmed as the novice teacher engages in professional practice.

The final component of the study is the recommendations for the profession and for further research possibilities. In summary, the recommendations for the profession are focused on the need for reviewing the Code of Ethics and the role of ethics in early childhood teacher education and professional life. Examining how the ethical/moral dimension of our work with children and families can be supported through the use of the Code and through more explicit education in ethics is a suggested research focus.

The AECA Code of Ethics

The identification of the contexts for the development and adoption of the AECA Code of Ethics will assist to frame the discussion on the methodology chosen for this study and the key findings. While the macro political and economic contexts for early childhood education in Australia have focused somewhat on instrumental and enterprise notions, there have been signs within the profession that it is aware of the need to acknowledge the core values which underpin its work. The most obvious symbol of this recognition was the decision by the peak national professional association to adopt a code of ethics. The AECA Code of Ethics was formally adopted in 1990.

The AECA Code of Ethics was developed by a nationally constituted Working Party after lengthy and extensive consultation with the early childhood sector. The Working Party acknowledged its indebtedness to the National Association of Young Children (NAEYC) in the United States of America for the use of that Association’s Code of Ethics as a reference point for their work in Australia. The AECA Code of Ethics is organised into five sections which detail responsibilities to children, families, colleagues, the community/society, and to self as a professional. Table 1 provides examples of statements or principles from each of the five sections of the AECA Code of Ethics.

Table 1: Examples of Principles within the AECA Code of Ethics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Section</th>
<th>Principle</th>
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<tr>
<td>In Relation to Children, I Will:</td>
<td>Acknowledge the uniqueness and potential of each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Relation to Families, I Will:</td>
<td>Engage in shared decision making with families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Relation to Colleagues, I Will:</td>
<td>Support and assist colleagues in their professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Relation to the Community and Society, I Will:</td>
<td>Promote children’s best interests through community education and advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Relation to Myself as a Professional, I Will:</td>
<td>Engage in critical self-reflection and seek input from colleagues</td>
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While the Code has generated a modicum of research interest, see for example, Coombe and Newman (1997), and Pollnitz (1997), and some philosophical discussion in the period immediately after its adoption (Coady, 1991, 1994), in more recent times there has been limited discussion on the values which are embedded in the Code and their relevance or not to contemporary professional contexts. The study described in this paper seeks to address this silence.

Methodological Issues

My decision to adopt conceptual analysis for the examination of the Code of Ethics and the student teachers’ philosophies was a logical choice given that meta-ethics is concerned with the nature of values and therefore it seemed to be an appropriate theory for an examination which was seeking to identify and interpret the nature of the values intended or embedded in the documents. Other perspectives could have been adopted, for example, a sociological or post modern perspective. However, I believed that such approaches might have narrowed the lens through which I examined the Code of Ethics. Conceptual analysis permits a broader perspective because it is not focused on whether a particular concept is right or wrong, or on dictionary definitions, but rather seeks to understand the meaning of the concept as it is used in a particular context (Gribble, 1969; Peters, 1966; Trigg 1973). There seemed to be an honest connection between my own value position on the nature of education and the methodological tradition I selected. Pring (2000) argues that researchers need to be aware of their own conceptual position in order to be clear about what is being claimed:

Therefore, in researching education we are engaged in two sorts of clarification - first, the general usage of the term (which is complex enough) and, second, the different ways in which the term is applied, especially in its evaluative sense, depending on different traditions of what is to be considered of value. Beware of those who, ignoring these conceptual points, speak with confidence about what their empirical investigations demonstrate. It all depends on what you mean. (p. 12)

The tradition of conceptual analysis in philosophical enquiry is committed to avoiding the difficulties raised by Pring as it is based on the Socratic questions: “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?”.

The naturalistic research tradition underpinned the conduct of the interviews undertaken in the study. According to this tradition, the two Working Party members and the four teachers I interviewed could be considered key informants. Mishler’s (1986, p.137) notion of “interviews as discourse” informed the conduct of the interviews. Mishler claims that the meaning of what is expressed by the informants is to be understood within the discourse surrounding the subject or theme that is being examined. Interview guides based on notes that I had made during the preliminary analysis of the Code of Ethics and the student teachers’ philosophies served to identify the issues which I wanted to discuss with the informants. Mishler also made me aware of the risk that transcripts tend to take on a life of their own. Returning to the original tape recordings and to my
interview notes helped me to find the balance between maintaining a coherent record of our conversations and the deconstruction of this record for the purpose of analysis.

**Key Findings**

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the findings from my study, I believe that there are some key matters to be explicated from the analysis of the Code of Ethics and the student teachers' philosophies as well as from the comparison and contrast between the two sets of documents and the interview data. As my research focus was on the identification of the nature and origin of the values embedded in Australian early childhood education, the discussion will focus on this aspect of my findings.

The conceptual analysis of the Code of Ethics was undertaken in several stages as the previous section mentioned. The three phases of the analysis involved: first, the identification of key phrases or words in the Code's principles; second, the categorisation of these key words into themes; and third, the identification of the core value commitments underpinning each of the themes. Table 2 provides examples from the three phases of the analysis.

**Table 2: Examples of the Phases of Analysis**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Actual Code principle</th>
<th>Key terms</th>
<th>Theme/s</th>
<th>Core Value/s</th>
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<tr>
<td>I will: Support and assist colleagues in their professional development (Section 3, Principle 1)</td>
<td>Support  Assist  Professional development</td>
<td>Professionalism  Relationships  Partnerships</td>
<td>Potentiality  Acknowledging the potential for growth in colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will: Engage in shared decision making with families (Section 2, Principle 3)</td>
<td>Engage  Shared decision making</td>
<td>Relationships  Partnerships</td>
<td>Democracy  Notions of shared responsibility are consistent with the democratic tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will: Acknowledge the worth of the cultural and linguistic diversity which my colleagues bring to the work place (Section 4, Principle 6)</td>
<td>Acknowledge  Worth of Diversity colleagues</td>
<td>Diversity  Professional responsibility</td>
<td>Pluralism  Acknowledging the contribution that diversity makes to a service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will: Honour the child's right to play in acknowledgement of the major contribution of play to development (Section 1, Principle 3)</td>
<td>Honour  Right to Contribution to development</td>
<td>Professional responsibility</td>
<td>Protection  Of the child's rights  Potentiality  Link between play and development</td>
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The core values within the Code of Ethics underpin the themes that I identified within the 42 principles of the Code. Four core value commitments embodied or intended were identified in the Code of Ethics: potentiality, democracy, pluralism and protection. A brief explanation of these commitments follows.

- **Protection.** Value commitments concerned with protection can be found in the Code's principles which reiterate the need for safe environments, where young children's vulnerability to adult influence and control is recognised. There are also principles concerned with protection as it relates to privacy and confidentiality matters.

- **Pluralism.** The values inherent in a commitment to pluralism are evident in the Code's principles that promote non-discriminatory practices, acceptance of diversity and tolerance for difference.

- **Potentiality.** Within many of the Code's principles there is a commitment to supporting every child's individual growth and development and the uniqueness of the context for that development. This commitment values potentiality. Similar respect for potentiality is expressed for professional colleagues.

- **Democracy.** Democratic principles within the Code commit the profession to shared decision making and to peaceful conflict resolution processes. Respect for each person's dignity and the need to build caring communities also resonate with democratic values.

While it has been argued that there is similarity in the moral principles which underpin most codes of ethics (Small, 1998), this does not mean that the values embedded in the principles are absolutes. For example, the values within the principle of "justice" in relation to children's rights have changed over time through community debate and rational commitment. In the past, codes of ethics within universities and medical institutions may have permitted research on children which would now be deemed unethical and a serious breach of their rights. For example, some hospitals in Australia have admitted taking organs from deceased infants and children without parental consent in the belief that the benefits to medical science outweighed the moral ought of full disclosure and informed consent to such procedures (Button, Rollins & Shaw, 2000). The public dismay at these disclosures and the consequent commitment to a change in practice seems to indicate a shift in community and institutional values concerned with child and parent rights in this context.

The common use of core moral principles within different codes of ethics acknowledges that there are some principles which seem to be universally applicable. Aubrey, David, Godfrey and Thompson (2000) claim that the various United Nations conventions are examples of the non-relativity of core values concerned with human rights and that these conventions do serve to support "the recognition for the personhood of children" (p. 160).
Silences within the Code were also identified through my analysis of the Code’s principles and my examination of the literature. These silences were confirmed when I compared and contrasted the Code’s commitments to those of the student teachers. In summary, the Code has a strong emphasis on value commitments concerned with professional relationships but it is relatively silent in any explicit sense on value commitments concerned with pedagogy. One of the Working Party members I interviewed commented that the decision was made to focus on responsibilities or commitments that had an ethical rather than a professional dimension. However, I would argue that it is not possible to separate professional matters in this way. Whether early childhood professionals seek to empower, transform, inspire, initiate, or to transmit, they are inevitably making decisions which are grounded in value commitments.

The Code’s emphasis on values concerned with relationships contrasted with the student teachers’ philosophies where pedagogy featured as their most important professional concern. All of the student teachers described commitments related to programme provision in their philosophies. Angela, for example, values a commitment to support the notion of children’s agency in learning:

I like to let the children lead the way, as I think that when children are truly interested in the topic at hand, they are intrinsically motivated, and learn a great deal more.

When I interviewed Angela in the second year of teaching after her graduation she explained that she remained committed to supporting children’s learning, and that she continued to seek ways to do that:

The children’s interests are the key focus of what you do. It’s something I’m only just working out. I don’t think I did that too well last year because I always worked with a global theme and it was always just so difficult to intertwine the children’s interests within that. This year I’m doing that much better.

Angela’s reflection on her work with children suggests that she was aware of the link between her values and aspirations for children and her practice as she sought ways to align her commitment to the practice.

My analysis of the Code of Ethics and the student teachers’ philosophies revealed other silences in both sets of documents, as the following example highlights. There is a commitment to the valuing of the “planned environment” in early childhood education which has its genesis in the Froebelian notion of the “child’s garden” and Montessori’s advocacy for child-sized furniture and materials. In the Australian Code of Ethics, the environment is mentioned as part of a broad protection commitment to providing both psychologically and physically safe environments:

Create and maintain safe healthy settings that enhance children’s autonomy, initiative, and self worth and respect their dignity. (Section 2, Principle 7)
However, values concerned with the link between the environment and aesthetic needs, children's learning and development, and inclusive practice, for example, are omitted. Seven, out of the 27 student teachers, articulated a more explicit commitment to the provision of environments which support pedagogy. There is an emphasis in these students' philosophies on a commitment to the value of outdoor environments in the overall provision of programmes for young children. The following examples from the student teachers' philosophies indicate their value commitments concerned with the outdoor environment:

I believe that children should interact with their environment both man-made and natural. I will encourage children to communicate their discoveries and feelings about their environment. (Nicole)

I believe that the outdoors is a very important part of the Centre. It is also a classroom. Therefore I shall have pets, provide a garden and enough space for freedom of movement and for active and passive activity. I will have a compost heap and recycle items. (Mary)

The provocation from the ongoing research programmes in Reggio Emilia (New, 1990), which suggests that the environment can be considered the "third teacher" acts as a reminder that values are central to decisions related to environments and that these decisions are more complex than the safety or protection notions inherent in the Code's commitments and the student teachers' valuing of the outdoor environment as a site for teaching and learning. In any future review of the Code of Ethics it would be reasonable to consider this aspect of early childhood education and its link to the moral nature of our work.

A further finding from my analysis is that neither the Code of Ethics nor the student teachers' philosophies have specific value commitments concerned with pedagogical practices of evaluation or assessment. The introduction of formal standardised assessment and evaluation of young children on entry to school in some states of Australia is an ethical challenge to early childhood professionals. Of particular concern in this context are children with additional needs and children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. To institutionalise disadvantage through mandated standardised testing requirements could be deemed to be a breach of children's rights. Professional deliberation on this issue would be supported and strengthened by reference to the ethical or moral considerations involved. The ethical dimensions might include: the fairness and equity issues of testing young children using English as the test language when the child is a novice or non-English speaker, and the issues concerned with how the data gained from the testing are to be utilised. However, because the Code does not provide explicit aspirations on the ethics of assessment and evaluation in early childhood education it has a limited use in guiding this deliberation except in a very general sense of value commitments to protection and respect for children's dignity.
Conclusion

In the study discussed in this paper I accept the premise that early childhood education is a moral concern because of the way in which values are central to the relationships on which it is based and to the pedagogical decisions that must be made by all concerned. Understanding the nature and origin of these values and the way that they link to education is important in the current education climate where values may be deemed to be relative or subjective constructs. If values are relative to individual contexts, then seeking to make changes in particular actions or policies which are harmful or discriminatory is difficult. For example, if value relativism held sway, then any demand to improve the status of young children in Australia could be rejected on the grounds that “this is the way it is in Australia”. Value relativity and subjectivity in education discourse ignores the existence of core values and shared understanding of their meaning. While individuals or communities might place weight on different values concerned with education, I believe that there is shared understanding on the nature of these different values.

The position that values early childhood education as an enterprise with an emphasis on means to ends rather than early education as a right of citizenship and having intrinsic value, supports the privatisation of services with a consequent reduction in the equity of availability. Additionally, this position promotes the adoption of narrowly conceived and mandated outcomes that are oriented towards children’s future achievements.

A model of early childhood education as a moral concern would support pedagogy based on respectful, democratic relationships and partnerships within services and recognition of the many ways children learn and develop, their own agency in these processes, and of the diversity of their life chances. Such a model would require early childhood professionals to critically examine and make transparent the values embedded in pedagogical decisions and in their professional relationships with others.

A code of ethics can provide the early childhood profession with the moral principles on which to base their practice as well as acting as a guide and focus for decision-making. The normative aspect of such codes may also contribute to raising the awareness of the wider community to the ethical or moral nature of our work. Our arguments for improved services for young children and their families; appropriately qualified staff and for respectful, responsive programmes may be strengthened by publicly acknowledging early childhood education as a moral concern. As Buzzelli (1996) contends, a moral lens is required to examine the early childhood profession’s work with children and families.

For a code of ethics to be part of the moral lens through which we examine early childhood education, it is necessary for it to be regularly reviewed (and perhaps) revised, in order that it presents an informed and broadly determined account of the values to which the profession aspires. My analysis of the Australian Early Childhood Association’s Code of Ethics suggests that such a review is overdue if this Code is to be of significant use in professional decision making and as a renewed pledge of our commitment to children, families and their communities.
References


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