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Advancing Leadership Capacity: Preparation of Early Childhood Leaders in Australia Through a Coursework Masters Degree

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ABSTRACT: In Australia, positional leadership in the Early Childhood (EC) sector is flourishing propelled by legislative obligations connected with the implementation of the *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA 2011a) requiring the employment of educational leaders in EC centres. This paper explores the preparation of EC leaders through postgraduate coursework studies at a masters level based on a content analysis of course information dealing with leadership and management of EC settings. Currently, there is limited research based evidence on the formal preparation of these educational leaders. Australian universities offer a range of coursework masters degrees focusing on educational leadership studies. The plethora of options available is confusing for those seeking employment as an educational leader in the EC sector. Findings reported in this paper provoke discussion about the relevance of postgraduate studies for advancing leadership capacity necessary in the EC sector.

Keywords: Early Childhood, leadership preparation, qualifications, training, Australia

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Introduction

The reliance on educational leaders to provide guidance in leading pedagogy, programs and policy within Early Childhood (EC) settings is now firmly acknowledged worldwide (see Aubrey, 2016). In countries such as Australia, this recognition is reflected in the government's interest in recruiting educational leaders to guide the implementation of evolving policy reforms within EC settings (Fleet et al., 2015; Garvis et al., 2013; Rouse & Spradbury, 2015; Sims et al., 2015; Waniganayake, 2015). There is now a substantial body of research evidence from affluent countries who are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that demonstrate strong links between the employment of staff with formal EC qualifications and better learning outcomes for children (eg, Hadfield et al, 2012; Nutbrown, 2012; Rodd, 2015; Siraj & Kingston, 2015). Various scholars in Australia for instance, note the Government's interest in employing graduate teachers in EC settings as a measure of quality improvement (Fleet et al., 2015; Garvis et al., 2013; Rouse & Spradbury, 2015; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). Yet, to what extent are the EC practitioners who are appointed as educational leaders in Australia, prepared for the complexities of leadership enactment in contemporary EC settings?

About six years ago, the Australian government mandated the establishment of the position of 'an educational leader' in every early childhood centre. It was deemed as necessary to appoint an Educational Leader to guide the major policy reforms being implemented through the *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA, 2011a). The primary job of these educational leaders was described in the *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2011b), under Quality Area 7 as follows:

> *Provision is made to ensure a suitable qualified and experienced educator or coordinator leads the development of the curriculum and ensures the establishment of clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning.*

Although it was acknowledged that these educational leaders needed to have 'suitable qualifications' and be 'experienced' in having worked in EC settings previously, no specific details about these qualifications or experiences were defined by the government. It was nevertheless, an important acknowledgement that those employed as educational leaders had achieved formal preparation in undertaking the roles and responsibilities of this new position.

Currently, there is no research on the effectiveness of these EC educational leaders based on their qualifications or any other aspect of their preparation for employment including work experience in EC settings, interest and aptitude for leadership. Since there is also no minimum qualification level set in appointing EC educational leaders, it is possible that they could have completed a three or four year EC Bachelor degree, a two year EC masters

degree or even a two or three year Diploma in EC studies. For those seeking formal training or preparation to become an educational leader the selection of an appropriate course of study is challenging because of the diversity of options available. The variation between undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as less formal professional development courses offered by various non-government agencies, adds to the confusion. While some of these courses offer specialisation in EC studies, others do not.

At present, leadership and management studies is an area mandated for inclusion in initial EC teacher education courses accredited by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA 2016), and include both bachelor and masters degree studies. Since the 1990s, Australian universities have been producing EC teacher graduates who are eligible to educate children birth to five years or/and teach 6-12 year olds in primary schools following the completion of an Early Childhood Bachelor degree (Fleer & Waniganayake, 1994). Typically, an EC Bachelor degree consists of one or two leadership and/or management units of study or courses that are compulsory. Graduates who complete these degrees qualify as EC teachers and can be appointed as educational leaders. This paper focuses on the preparation of educational leaders in Australia through postgraduate coursework studies at a masters level.

Contextualisting leadership capacity building

As noted by Rodd (2013), scholars writing about educational leadership have interpreted the concept of 'leadership capacity' in at least three ways. Most commonly, leadership capacity is examined within the context of succession planning to enable someone to replace or take on the responsibilities of leadership within an organization. The importance of strategic planning in identifying and mentoring those who demonstrate potential for this role are highlighted as ways of building leadership capacity within organisations. Pointing to the absence of career planning, a second approach to leadership capacity building has emerged with the increasing professionalization of the EC sector as a whole. By aligning diverse qualifications with different levels of leadership conceptualisations, Rodd suggests that "*different training and capacity building opportunities need to be developed*" (p. 259) to support the variable needs, capabilities and interests of aspiring leaders as well as the organisations seeking to employ educational leaders. In this category, Rodd aligns postgraduate qualifications specifically with a "*leader being perceived as an entrepreneur*" (p. 260), and this approach reflects the possibilities of leadership and management skills being merged together in day-to-day operations of EC settings.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Rodd (2013) declared that becoming better equipped as EC leaders through "*the inclusion of leadership as a core element and the promotion of early identification of leadership in pre-service training is vital*" (p. 258). It is this approach to leadership capacity building through formal studies that we are interested in pursuing in this paper. This approach also supports Rodd's appraisal that "*fortunately, 'learning on the job' with support from some generic training is no longer considered adequate for transition to leadership positions*" (p. 258). Instead, Rodd reinforces the view that developing leadership capacity also requires a long-term commitment to continuous professional learning. For the purposes of this paper however, we set out to examine how a masters degree aimed at producing EC graduate teachers was targeting leadership capacity building through the acquisition of a specialist body of knowledge, skills, capabilities and understandings about educational leadership.

In contextualizing this approach, it is also necessary to understand that there is no real separation between teaching and leading clearly visible in the initial EC teacher education degrees currently available in Australia. So far, university based EC degrees do not target the preparation of educational leaders specifically. However, there is increasing recognition about the differentiation between the roles of teachers and leaders and there are at least three key drivers that are influencing the advancement of the scientific knowledge base on educational leadership shaping the work of EC educators in Australia:

- **Front-line practice challenges** reflecting the increasing complexity of EC teachers' roles and responsibilities in leading pedagogy, curriculum planning and assessment of children's learning as the core business of EC settings;

- **Steering by governments** seeking both systemic national reform and organisational change at the coalface through policy and practice innovation; and its consequences on the professional autonomy of EC teachers and leaders;

- **Global recognition in ECE quality provisioning** aimed at achieving better learning outcomes for children is indicating the centrality of pedagogical leadership and the relationships between well qualified teachers and leaders.

The discussion of these trends is expanded further in the section on research on qualifications of EC leaders, that follows. These key drivers reflect the interconnectivities between the macro-micro spheres of influence and activity between the diverse stakeholders within the EC sector. Rodd (2015, p. 5) asserts that these "*stakeholders including politicians, policy makers, government advisers, and early years professionals themselves now validate the intrinsic relationship between quality early years provision and capable leadership*." The emerging new discourse of educational leadership in EC policy and practice as noted by Thomas and Nuttall (2014) also reflects the growing importance of scholarly work in this area. Within this context, one must ask what is the role of higher

education institutions involved in the preparation of EC leaders? If pedagogical leadership is important in delivering quality EC programs, it is essential that attention is paid to EC leadership studies offered through universities.

In Finland for example, it is taken for granted that all primary and secondary school teachers will complete a masters degree in teacher education before commencing employment as school teachers (Sahlberg, 2013). This expectation however does not apply to teachers working with children birth to six years before they start primary school. In Australia, as in Finland, it is also difficult to locate information about the availability and uptake of coursework masters degrees by EC graduates for the purposes of leadership preparation. Despite the heightened awareness of the importance of leadership in EC settings, to date there has been no comprehensive national study into EC leader preparation of university graduates.

Under the *Australian Qualifications Framework* (AQF), there is an expectation that those graduates completing an extended coursework masters degree over two years full-time equivalent, will be able to "*apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner*" (AQFC, 2014, p.5). These expectations apply to the graduates of the Master of Teaching degrees who are interested in becoming EC teachers and/or educational leaders in Australia.

It is also asserted that high order thinking capabilities, including reflexivity and critical analytical skills associated with advanced disciplinary studies in early childhood, are necessary in performing leadership responsibilities effectively. Emerging in the last decade, the initial preparation of EC teachers through a Masters of Teaching degree has been increasing in popularity. By reflecting on how leadership preparation is included in these degrees, this paper offers some insights about the relevance of investing in postgraduate coursework studies in advancing the leadership capacity of the EC sector.

Research on the qualifications of early childhood leaders

Analysis of research evidence collected overtime suggest that there is now a strong consensus about the need to have 'training' or formal preparation for those appointed to leadership roles in the EC sector (Rodd, 2015; Waniganayake, 2002; 2015). For example, in the much quoted research on the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study in England, it was found that "*the quality of the learning environment increased with the early years leader's qualifications*" (Sylva et al, 2010, cited in Siraj & Kingston, 2015, p. 47). Studies in Australia have also continued to identify challenges of appraising EC leadership qualifications due to the diversity of levels, curriculum quality and content covered in diverse courses representing vocational certificates, diplomas and bachelor

degrees held by EC teachers in this country (Fleet et al., 2015; Ortlip, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011; Rouse & Spradbury, 2015).

There has also been an absence of graduates with a masters degree participating in published research on educational leadership in Australia, and this may be a reflection of the relative newness of aligning leadership development with postgraduate studies in this country. The situation is exacerbated also by the limited attention to the articulation between the certificate, diploma and degree level EC courses and the absence of research that has systematically investigated course content focusing on leadership preparation. This situation presents challenges for anyone trying to link professional qualifications with job expectations and, the observation of EC educators performing "l*argely undifferentiated roles*" (Ortlip, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011 cited in Rouse & Spradbury, 2015, p. 2) is not surprising.

Nevertheless, there is now recognition of the increasing complexity of working in EC settings (Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2012; Clark & Murray, 2012; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). Based on the findings of their research, Campbell-Evans, Stamopoulos and Maloney (2014) for instance, have recommended revising initial teacher education programs in order to build leadership capabilities through university studies. Lending support, Garvis et al., (2013, p. 34) add that the importance of addressing "*the changing pedagogical and conceptual situations*" encountered in contemporary EC settings, in the preparation of EC leaders. EC educators in Singapore have also referred to the absence of role clarity contributing to "*the ambiguities, challenges and struggles they encountered*" when enacting leadership roles (Ebbeck et al., 2014, p. 12).

Taking into account trends emerging in Australia and the UK, Rouse and Spradbury (2015, p. 10) encapsulate the current context of EC leadership preparation as follows:

> *It is not uncommon for leaders in early childhood settings to take up their roles without formal leadership training (Aubrey, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014); however, managing the complexities of pedagogical leadership in a sector undergoing significant changes necessitates a need for specific leadership training, role models and ready access to mentors to build the skills necessary to meet the increasingly demanding complexities.*

Leadership work also demands making judgements and calls upon educational leaders to demonstrate their capabilities as analytical thinkers, who are able to make ethical decisions using mental models and effective communication skills that go beyond basic training (Waniganayake et al., 2012). This perspective is also reinforced by Hard and Jonsdottir (2013) who contend that "*there needs to be specific attention to the study of leadership and particular skill development*" (p. 322), and "*knowledgeable, skillful leaders*

who continue to learn about the craft of leadership in order to build leadership capacity in others and the collective capacity of the group" (p. 323).

In progressing this discussion, comments by Ireland (2007) writing specifically about the challenges of pedagogical leadership when working with babies and toddlers highlighting expertise, experience and professional maturity of EC leaders in responding appropriately to ethical issues, and in keeping with a centre's goals and philosophy more broadly, are also relevant. Evidence of theorising about EC leadership preparation is however scant in literature published in the English language. In Australia, within this context of inadequate theorisation and without adequate role clarity in performing leadership, there is increasing concern about research findings indicating teachers are struggling to conceptualise leadership and its implementation in EC settings (Fleet et al., 2015; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Sims et al., 2014; Thomas & Nuttall, 2014).

In order to prepare preservice teachers for the inevitable leadership responsibilities that they will be expected to undertake as novice teachers, Campbell-Evans, Stamopoulos, and Maloney (2014), found that the inclusion of more relevant leadership units in undergraduate degree coursework was imperative. Today, this recognition has been formalised through ACECQA (2016) with the inclusion of leadership studies as one of the six areas of curriculum standards used when appraising and accrediting EC teacher education courses.

In contributing to the professionalization of the EC workforce, this paper seeks to expand the possibilities of innovation and re-imagination of leadership preparation through postgraduate studies as a resource for advancing pedagogical leadership. This discussion is foregrounded within an analysis of web-based information on EC coursework masters degrees offered by Australian universities.

Study objectives and methods

This paper reports on a content analysis of the Masters of Teaching degrees completed by those seeking employment as EC teachers, and were available at Australian universities during 2015–2016. The Masters of Teaching degrees offer graduates from various disciplines or professions, a pathway into an initial teacher qualification that is equivalent to an EC Bachelor degree. It has been found that graduates from diverse disciplines such as accounting, business, economics, law, politics, and science, seeking career changes by working with young children from birth, enroll in these programs (Fenech, Waniganayake, & Fleet, 2008). Although new to the EC sector, these graduates bring with them skills and knowledge from a diversity of backgrounds that could be built upon when

working as educational leaders in EC settings. For ease of reference, from now on these degrees are referred to as 'MTeach' in this paper.

This study was aimed at addressing two research questions:

1) *What types of postgraduate courses are available for educational leaders working in EC settings in Australia?*

2) *How does the MTeach degree reflect adequate preparation for working as educational leaders in EC settings in Australia ?*

Educational leaders are expected to be knowledgeable about the *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2011b), and Quality Area 7, defines the specific standards expected for *Leadership and Service Management*, and these requirements have shaped the analysis of the data collected in this study. In gathering evidence to answer these two research questions, data for this study was collected in the form of course information that was freely available on public access through university websites. Subsequently, this information was systematically scrutinized or 'measured' against the *ACECQA Curriculum Guidelines (ACECQA 2016)* which are used to accredit EC teacher education courses in Australia. Our analysis was confined to the standards specified under the category of "Early childhood professional practice" as noted later in detail in the findings section of this paper.

The Unit of study is the single basic component of a university degree, and words such as 'courses', 'modules' and 'subjects' can also be used interchangeably with the same meaning. Each university defines the scope and number of units or courses that must be completed in order to achieve a particular degree as defined under the *Australian Qualifications Framework* (AQFC, 2014). In keeping with this framework, both universities and external professional accreditation agencies, can also specify course content and standards expected of graduates who satisfactorily attain the standards required for the purposes of employment. In this instance, the MTeach is accredited by the ACECQA, and therefore we have used their standards in 'measuring' course content to see if there is adequate preparation for educational leadership roles.

Content analysis was employed to explore course information contained with the MTeach degree programs included in this research. Content analysis encompasses the creation of replicable data categories representing a studied context (Krippendorff, 2012). Online searches were conducted during 2015-2016 to identify and collate relevant units and categorise coursework content published on the university websites freely available to the public. A series of category systems were developed to segment and code (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) course information in terms of the leadership and/or management

knowledge and skills being promoted by an Australian university offering an accredited MTeach degree by ACECQA.

It can be said that this study followed a "text driven content analysis" (Krippendorff, 2012, p. 355) methodology influenced by the application of ACECQA's *Curriculum Standards* on leadership expectations as discussed earlier. As an exploratory study, we have used these standards by way of making inferences about the leadership capacity of educational leaders who hold a unique position of employment situated in EC settings in Australia. Both qualitative categories and quantitative content analysis tables (Krippendorff, 2012) were drawn out to provide a scoping overview and a snapshot of the number of units or courses being offered under each category in each degree in relation to leadership, management and professional experience placement units. As the data for this research was collected through freely accessible university homepages ethics approval was not required (Given, 2016). For the purposes of retaining anonymity however, each university was allocated a numerical code.

Key Findings

In addressing the two research questions of this study, the findings from the data collected and analysed are presented in four ways. This discussion begins by responding to the *first research question on the type of EC coursework masters degrees* available in Australia. *The three sections that follow address the second research question on how universities went about developing the leadership capacity of their EC graduates* by examining the course content and the program aims and learning objectives of the MTeach degrees included in this study.

Type of EC coursework masters degrees

During 2015 –2016, the exploration of University websites indicated that there were at least six types of EC coursework masters degrees available in Australia. At the time of data collection, of the 40 universities in Australia, the majority (n=38) were funded by the Australian Government as public universities, and the remaining two were run as private enterprises. Table 1, provides an analysis of universities according to the type of EC coursework degrees they offered.

TABLE 1 Availability of EC degrees at Australian Universities (2015-2016)

Type of EC coursework degrees offered		Total (n=40)
Category 1:	***MTeach with a focus on Early Childhood*** – there is variation in the age range (0-5, 0-8 or 0-12 years)	**13** (32.5%)
Category 2:	***Master of Early Childhood***	**11** (27.5)
Category 3:	***Masters of Education*** (EC specialisation)	**12** (30%)
Category 4:	***Master of Educational Leadership***	**20** (50%)
Category 5:	***Master of Educational Leadership*** (EC specialisation)	**1**
Category 6:	***Bachelor degree in EC*** but no EC coursework masters degrees	**13** (38%)
No EC coursework masters or bachelor degrees at all		**6** (15%)

As can be seen in Table 1, six out of the 40 Australian universities (ie, 15%) were not involved in EC teacher education at all. Of the 34 universities offering EC teacher education programs, twelve (ie, about one third) offered only Bachelor degrees in EC. Those who have completed an EC Bachelor degree and therefore eligible to be employed as a university qualified graduate EC teacher, could select to do either a generic Master of Education degree at 12 universities (ie, 30%) or a specialist Master of Early Childhood degree offered by 11 universities (ie, 27.5%). Some of these degrees included leadership and management related units. It was however difficult to assess the extent to which they focused on EC content or contexts within the leadership and management units offered within these generic masters degrees or specialist masters degrees focusing on educational leadership.

Category 4 shows that 50 per cent of Australian universities (n=20) offered a Master of Educational Leadership degree. Typically, these degrees targeted primary and secondary school teachers interested in seeking leadership appointments. Although some of these degrees had units of study focusing on EC, only one university offered an early childhood specialisation within an educational leadership masters degree. In this degree, all students were expected to complete two theory based units on educational leadership and another on organisational change. Given the large number and dispersed nature of program content, the analysis of these degrees was beyond the scope of this small scale unfunded study.

Among those universities identified with delivering EC masters degrees, 13 (ie, 32.5 %) offered a Master of Teaching that focused on the early years, and targeting those

interested in teaching children aged between either Birth to Five years, Birth to Eight years or Birth to 12 years. The arguments in this paper are founded upon the analysis of these 13 programs in Category 1.

Course content

Under the Government's higher education policies, as set out in the *Australian Qualifications Framework* guidelines:

> *"Masters Degree (Extended) is designed so that graduates will have undertaken a program of structured learning with some independent research and a significant proportion of practice-related learning. As this qualification is designed to prepare graduates to engage in a profession, the practice-related learning must be developed in collaboration with a relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body*" (AQFC, 2014, p. 61).

In this instance, universities offering a MTeach degree must also comply with the ACECQA (2016) curriculum standards arranged under six categories: *1) Psychology and Child Development; 2) Teaching Strategies, 3) Education and Curriculum Studies; 4) Family and Community Contexts; 5) History and Philosophy of Early Childhood; and 6) Early Childhood Professional Practice and Leadership*. In turn, the Curriculum Standard focusing on leadership objectives consists of the following five elements: *i) leadership; ii) management and administration; iii) professional identity and development; iv)advocacy; and v) research*. It is expected that when submitting their EC courses for appraisal and accreditation as an initial teacher education degree, each university will map the modules/units of study to demonstrate how they are achieving ACECQA's curriculum standards. In our investigation of the MTeach courses, we therefore also examined course content in terms of the various units that target EC leadership and management as well as professional practice placements (ie, practicum).

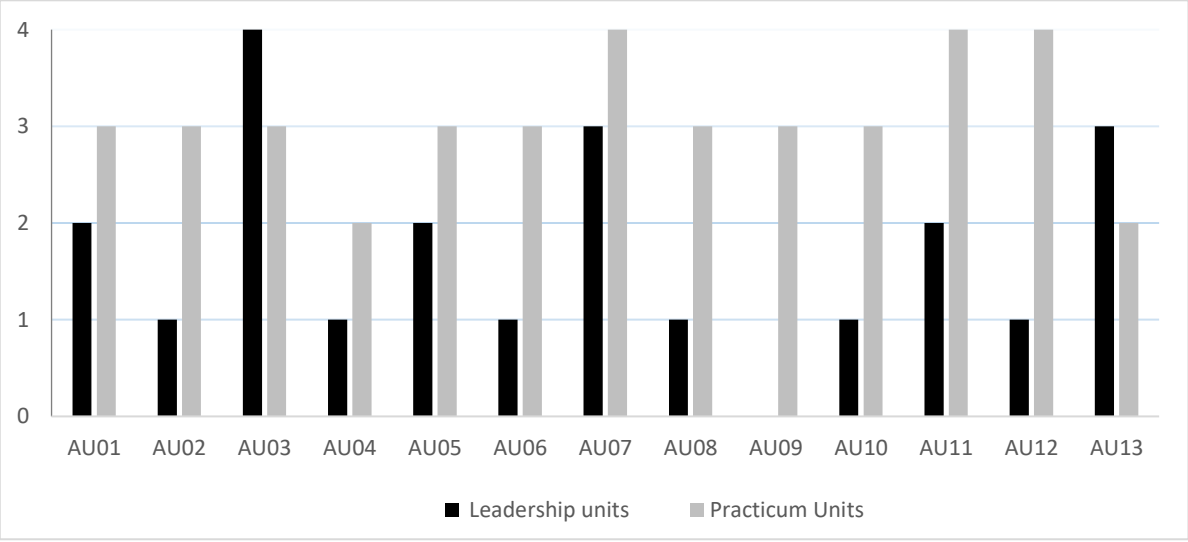

FIGURE 1 Comparison of the number of leadership and/or management units

As can be seen in Figure 1, apart from one university (AU09) most Australian universities each offered between one to four postgraduate units of study on leadership and management in EC settings. One university (AU10) offered a unit on professionalisation, including the development of a professional philosophy within a research unit, and this unit was included in this analysis. In contrast, every university offered a range of two to four practicum placement units. This is not surprising given that ACECQA (2016) has mandated expectations for minimum number of days of professional experience studies located within an EC setting.

These requirements must be satisfied in order to achieve accreditation as an approved teacher education course. As Figure 2 shows, the majority of these universities (n=9) exceeded ACECQA (2016) requirements with 65 or more days on placement, and with AU02 including 85 days. Importantly, only one university (AU03) offered some type of internship or practice opportunity to acquire leadership and/or management skills through direct experience and this comprised "a ten day community placement" at an EC setting. Course information online available for public access did not allow us to undertake a deeper level of analysis to ascertain if any other university also incorporated preparation for leadership and management work within their professional experience units/courses.

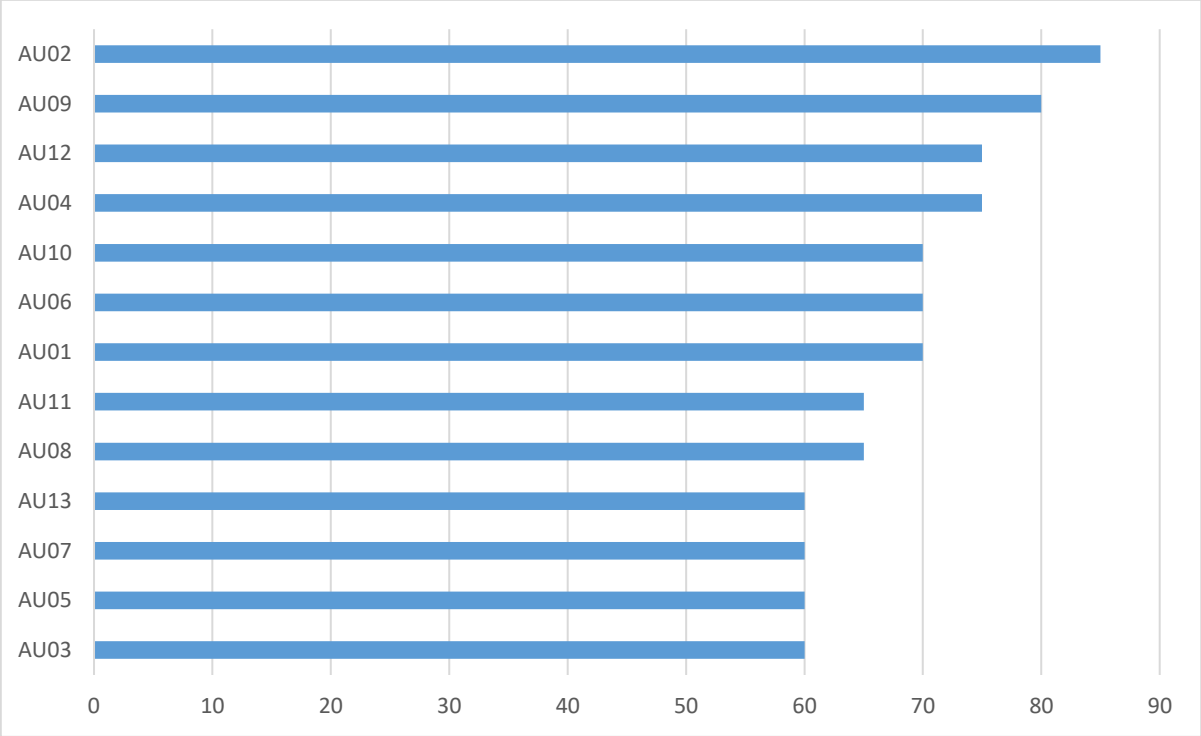

FIGURE 2 Number of practicum placement days offered by each university

Unit descriptions

Unit description information was downloaded from each university homepage for each of the leadership and management units identified in constructing Table 1. The content of these units were then interrogated inductively to ascertain key characteristics of each unit of study, and this analysis yielded six key themes as follows:

a) **Leadership theory** - Some universities referred specifically to pedagogical leadership (AU01, AU03, AU04). There was recognition that these units were delivered as postgraduate level studies for those interested in engaging "in critical inquiry of intentional teaching and understandings of early childhood pedagogy and curriculum at an advanced level" (AU01). There was a common perception that working as leaders required a sound understanding of the social, political and legislative frameworks and the associated professional accountabilities (AU01, AU02, AU03, AU04, AU06). This focus was translated into every day work through site-based leadership and management practice (AU01, AU03, AU02, AU04).

b) **Advocacy for human rights –** This theme reflected both generic human rights perspectives (AU13) and specific children's rights connected with the UN Convention on the rights of children (UNICEF 1989) aimed at supporting children and families (AU01, AU02, AU03, AU04, AU05). One university (AU13), had a dedicated unit on children's rights. Another university was explicit by declaring their aim was to produce graduates "as activist reflective practitioners" (AU05). Most universities also promoted students' understanding and awareness of national and international policies, when investigating ECEC issues, debates and challenges (AU01, AU05, AU12, AU13) with the implications for practice and policy.

c) **Professional identity and professionalization of the sector** – Several universities required students to develop "their personal approach/ philosophy of learning, development and teaching within ECEC" (AU13) and "explore and make explicit their personal professional philosophy of education" (AU10). Other universities (AU12 and AU05) extended this by expecting students to "reflect critically on your developing identity as an early childhood professional. This includes articulating your educational philosophy and pedagogy of teaching" (AU12). Another university emphasized the importance of "Developing a personal philosophy of leadership; establishing a leadership identity and leadership style" (AU13).

d) **Management aspects** – Four universities required students to reflect critically on organizational and management structures (AU01, AU02, AU11, AU13), with attention to financial or fiscal management, including funding and budgeting considerations. Some universities focused on exploring the "nature of education systems" (AU10) and/or considering ECE centres as "elements of systems" (AU06). Only one university had a unit targeting both child and staff wellbeing as its primary focus (AU07). Two universities referred to child and family wellbeing (AU01, AU06) but not the staff. Others referred to human resources management (AU04) broadly. Although 'industrial awards', 'cultural diversity' and 'time and resources' were also listed, these units did not mention wellbeing.

e) **EC Pedagogy** - Several universities approached leading and managing work through the provisioning of quality EC services and teaching practice (AU01, AU02, AU04). Teacher leadership was promoted through the "investigation of approaches to reconceptualising early childhood pedagogy" (AU01) and EC curriculum (AU01, AU04) with an emphasis on "the importance of the teacher as a curriculum decision-maker" (AU01). Likewise, at another university it was noted that students will have "opportunities to research contemporary theories of early childhood education, reflect on their own beliefs and values, refine their personal philosophy of teaching and learning, and consider the implications for their future role as pedagogical leaders" (AU03). This university offered two units on pedagogical leadership and one of these was directly connected with the professional experience placement with 3-5 year olds. Identified as a capstone unit, students were able to connect theory and practice and acquire research skills "by engaging in research into their own teaching practices" (AU03).

f) **Developing relationships –** Inclusion of partnerships with other professionals, families and communities, was a key aspect the majority of universities (AU01, AU02, AU03, AU05, AU06, AU08, AU11, AU12, AU13) promoted in their leadership and management units. One of these universities described this work in terms of 'community leadership' (AU03) and another (AU12) highlighted 'family and community partnerships' in their unit title.

In addition to the specific knowledge and understandings expected of new graduates, there were more general skills considered necessary in being and becoming an educational leader. For instance, it was anticipated that graduates would acquire a range of analytical and communication skills that could be put to use in either managing a centre and/or when working as an educational leader within a centre or more generally within the community. Consider for example, the aims to "develop skills to investigate and critically examine issues from a range of perspectives, and argue their position on these issues…" (AU13). Another university expressed this in terms of being able to "explore and justify the positions they adopt" (AU10).

Most universities (eg, AU01, AU03, AU05, AU11, AU12) also expected their graduates to "critically evaluate theoretical and research literature and global and national policy developments." (AU11). Another university noted that their programs enabled graduates to "interpret and critically analyse current research and issues in early childhood education, consider how research impacts on current thinking and methodologies with regard to teaching and learning in early childhood programs" (AU06). In keeping with the Curriculum Standards set by ACECQA (2016), some universities also included research-based project work in the assessment requirements (AU01, AU03, AU06) as this was seen as an opportunity for students to "collaborate with services to develop a resource or undertake a project suitable to the needs and focus of the service" and thereby the teaching and learning that occurred in this unit was mutually beneficial.

MTeach program aims and learning objectives

In seeking to understand what each university was aiming to achieve in terms of its MTeach graduates, the aims and/or program learning objectives of each degree was examined. It was surprising to find that only four universities (AU01, AU05, AU08 and AU10) had clearly articulated program learning objectives accessible through their websites. The others, had less formal information typically describing the program aims in relation to prospective employment opportunities for graduates. In analysing this information, four categories pertaining to the development of graduate outcomes of each degree emerged as follows:

i) **Educational Leadership** (AU09): One university emphasised the focus on leadership by stating that "graduates of this course are prepared for leadership in Early childhood education settings". This institution however did not have any identifiable leadership preparation units in the MTeach program, and more information about each unit was necessary to assess if leadership matters were treated in an integrated way throughout the degree program.

ii) **Both Teaching and Leadership** (AU02, AU04, AU05, AU07, AU08): Three of these universities had well articulated program learning objectives. Clearly, these universities were intentional in seeking to prepare graduates who were capable decision-makers, in performing both teaching and leadership functions. These institutions also mentioned the importance of ethical practice, and advocacy work. In being "accomplished and articulate" (AU04), and with a sense of agency, graduates were expected to "inspire and influence the next generation" (AU02).

iii) **Teachers or Teaching** (AU03, AU06, AU11, AU12, AU13): This focus was in keeping with the fact that the MTeach was accredited by ACECQA as an initial teacher education program. As such the aims generally referred to the employability of graduates as a "qualified teacher working with children and their families in prior to school and primary school settings" (AU03).

iv) **Ambiguous (AU01, AU10, AU13):** From the information available online, it was too difficult to identify the anticipated graduate outcomes of these programs. They did not refer to teaching or leadership explicitly. Instead, they focused on broader conceptualisations incorporating skills, qualities and knowledge expected of their MTeach graduates. One university which had a list of over ten program learning outcomes did not have any dedicated leadership and/or management units within their MTeach. Another referred to the anticipated skills and knowledges of their graduates, and this did not explicitly mention teaching or leading roles.

These four categories reflect the challenges of including the preparation of graduates for the duality of performing both teaching and leadership roles within an initial teacher education degree such as the MTeach. Although some universities were able to articulate leadership preparation as one of many outcomes being targeted in their MTeach degree, poor alignment between course aims and subject contents as well as the absence of clear program objectives, weaken the potential for success in both domains of teaching as well as leadership.

Conclusions

Postgraduate coursework studies in Australia, offer pathways to both teaching and leading in ECE settings. Whilst the diversity of options available was worth noting, distinguishing between these courses in terms of the aims, program learning objectives and graduate outcomes is not easy, to say the least. The inclusion of leadership preparation within initial teacher education courses such as the MTeach, highlights the importance of clarifying the way EC educational leaders are prepared in the future.

This paper contributes to the professionalisation of the sector by shifting the dialogue on staff qualifications to consider the intersect between teacher and leader preparation. As the MTeach is an accredited teacher education degree, it is not surprising that there was some level of commonality achieved through the curriculum standards defined by ACECQA (2016) on leadership preparation. The extent to which these guidelines are a sufficient indicator of leadership preparation is however, a separate matter. Likewise, whether or not the current teacher standards are sufficient in meeting employer expectations of educational leaders, is also yet to be investigated by researchers.

Content covered in the MTeach on leadership theory, children's rights, and working with families and other professionals, was not surprising, given the consistent alignment with traditional roles of advocacy and networking expected of EC educators. Course content on pedagogical leadership as well as strategic and visionary roles, was disappointingly patchy. The notable absence of an explicit focus on staff relationships and wellbeing is also a concern, especially given that leadership research has continuously highlighted working with staff as an area of concern for leaders (Hard, 2008; Hayden, 1998; Rodd, 2012; Waniganayake et al., 2000). As noted by Waniganayake et al (2012, p.8) silence on leadership matters of gender, culture and class within the EC sector, also reinforces the importance of practice informed by research. Given the pivotal role played by leaders in creating the ethos or the interactive ambiance of an organization, inclusion of studies on organizational culture is essential.

Inclusion of a unit aimed at developing a professional philosophy by numerous universities, is commendable although more information was needed to assess the inclusion of leadership aspirations. Having a personal philosophy is also not the same as leading the development of an organizational vision, underpinned by shared goals and values of the children, families and staff at the centre. In multi-cultural societies such as Australia, the complexity of this task is exacerbated by the diversity of beliefs, attitudes and values about learning and teaching as well as leadership enactment.

To achieve better connectivity between theory and practice, the inclusion of leadership preparation work in the mandated professional experience placements by one university,

is also worthy of exploration by others. Importantly, these two aspects sit outside ACECQA's accreditation standards that reflect leadership awareness rather than a comprehensive approach to leadership enactment. The question remins, can an initial teacher education degree achieve leadership preparation to satisfy the complex roles and responsibilities expected of today's educational leaders working in ECE settings?

In order to address this question, dialogue between the key stakeholders concerned with EC leader preparation is essential so that agreement can be achieved in identifying knowledge and skills expected of ECE leaders. The findings of this study suggest that the overcrowded curriculum of an initial teacher education course such as the MTeach may not be the ideal way forward for advancing leadership capacity building in the sector. Inclusion of new and more leadership content can also take away from in-depth engagement necessary for the development of critical thinking capabilities expected of EC leaders. Separation between teaching and leading is also appropriate because not every teacher wants to become a leader. Leadership aspirations may also emerge only after working for a few years as a teacher.

Accordingly, having a dedicated Masters of Educational Leadership that addresses the needs of EC leaders may be the better way to foster leadership preparation in a more systematic way. This study uncovered one such course in Australia as indicated earlier in this paper. This course did not however include any experiential leadership preparation and more information is required to understand its impact in practice. As such this study affirms the importance of tracking ECE teacher career trajectories to understand the effectiveness of leadership preparation from the perspective of the graduates, their employers as well as the course providers – in this instance, the universities.

Tracking and appraising national trends regarding the impact of qualifications on leadership enactment overtime can be strengthened for instance with better access and linking of university datasets with the EC workforce census data and the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection (NECECC) managed by the government. To this end, it is pleasing to note that the Australian Government is currently exploring the development of a national education evidence base "to monitor educational outcomes and inform policy development and evaluation" (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2016, p.3).

There is an urgent necessity to focus attention on the leadership preparation in the EC sector. Leading scholar on EC leadership, Jillian Rodd (2015, p.6) emphasises that

> *Because of the rapid pace of change in policy, context and expertise, competent leadership cannot be left to chance. Early years leaders need to learn how to lead! Consequently, leadership preparation and development in the early years sector require considerable professional attention and investment.*

This is a global call for research, not limited to Australia. The establishment of a well-resourced international study to investigate the nature and type of university courses in Early Childhood Education at Bachelor and Master level, can enable us to capture at least a snapshot of the currency of the global landscape of EC qualifications today. Information about course content – including admission requirements, core curriculum, pedagogy and assessments, as well as graduate outcomes in relation to educational leadership employment - the focus of this paper, can enhance our understanding about leadership preparation and its adequacy for practice in front-line service delivery in EC settings. In turn, by establishing connections between leader preparation and practice based on empirical evidence on leadership enactment, we can embark on planning more strategically for future provisioning of EC services as well as career and status advancement of the EC profession.

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