Can childcare practicum encourage degree-qualified staff to enter the childcare workforce?

Karen Thorpe

Prue Millear

Anne Petriwskyj

Abstract

Concern to ensure that all children have access to high quality educational experiences in the early years of life has instigated moves to increase qualifications of staff in the childcare workforce, in particular to increase the number of degree qualified teachers. However existing data suggest that work in the childcare sector is viewed less favourably by those undertaking early childhood education degrees. For most, childcare is not a preferred place of employment. This study asked whether a practicum in a childcare setting would improve attitudes to childcare and willingness to consider working in childcare settings. In a study of a cohort of Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) students, measures of attitudes to childcare and willingness to work in childcare were taken before and after practicum. Additionally students provided accounts of their practicum experiences. Results indicate a trend in which there was a group increase in positive attitudes and willingness to consider work in childcare but considerable individual differences influenced by the quality of the practicum experience. The relationship with, and model provided by, centre directors and the group leader in the practicum class was identified as key influencing factors. Results are discussed in term of models of pedagogical leadership.

There is compelling evidence that educational experiences in the early years of life provide the foundation for attainments, well-being and social inclusion into adulthood (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Though the family remains the primary source of early childhood education and care (ECEC) the potential of non-parental ECEC services to deliver long-term positive outcomes has been clearly demonstrated. Randomised control intervention studies suggest a causal relationship between experience of high quality ECEC programs and positive life-course (Reynolds, et al, 2001; Schweinhart et al, 2005) while evidence from neuroscience provides growing understanding of the underlying neurological mechanisms that connect early experience to later outcomes (Kaffman & Meaney, 2007). These bodies of evidence have necessitated a changing understanding of the role of ECEC services in many economies. While in Nordic economies there has long been a commitment to universal provision of high quality ECEC services (OECD 2006), in English-speaking Western economies movement toward this position has been more recent (OECD, 2006; Ishimine, et al, 2009; Thorpe , et al, 2010). Here high-quality early experiences are now increasingly understood by policy makers as a child's right and as a public good.

In response to this changing conceptualisation in many jurisdictions there has been a restructuring of systems of governance to include education (preschool) and care (childcare) services within a single system with a unified expectation of high quality provision of care and education regardless of place of delivery. There has been a move from the differentiated and short-term goals of supporting parent involvement in the work force (childcare) or preparing children for school (preschool education) to that of attaining the long-term, and singular, goal of improving children's life chances (Thorpe, et al, 2010). A key focus in this quality agenda has been improvement of the qualification of the childcare workforce, including a call to increase the number of degree qualified staff working in childcare services (e.g. Barnett 2003; Moss, 2006; COAG 2009)

However, the increased participation of degree-qualified staff in the childcare sector may not be achieved easily. Though an increasing number of jurisdictions have merged their ECEC services to operate under a unified governance structure, there remains a legacy of inequities in work conditions, work status and attendant public and workforce attitudes, between childcare and early education settings.

First, there are structural inequities. Employees working in the childcare sector have commonly been viewed as technicians while those in the early education sector have been viewed as educators (Moss, 2006). Aligning with these views, the staff members working in

childcare have received technical training of one to three years and those in early education have typically been degree qualified with a university education of three to four years duration. Compared with those in early education services far fewer childcare staff members hold degree qualifications and, of these, most have worked in managerial positions with lower proportions of their time engaged in interactions with children (Moss, 2006). Commensurate with these entrenched differences, the conditions of work (work hours, holiday entitlement, pay) with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Gormley, et al, 2004; Gable et al, 2007) remain less favourable in the childcare sector compared with those in early education. These differences are evidenced in problems of recruitment and retention of staff to the childcare sector (Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union {LHMU}, 2000; Herzenberg et al, 2005; Gable et al, 2007). In Australia, for example, the rates of staff turnover in childcare across different states range from 26% to 60% per annum (LHMU, 2000) while rates of 30% per annum have been reported in the United States (The Center for the Childcare Workforce, 2002). While interventions to provide cash incentives have been shown to reduce staff turnover, there remain concerns about work conditions and status in childcare (Gable et al, 2007). Neither unification of governance structures nor experimental changes in work conditions have yet successfully addressed these issues (Gable, et al 2007).

Second, there are attitudinal barriers. Under a differentiated ECEC system, childcare (care) was viewed as serving the needs of working parents while preschool (education) was viewed as serving the needs of the child. The misalignment of early education programs with working hours of many parents prevented access to early education and led to inequities for families who faced a tension between providing income and accessing educationally focused programs for their child. Commensurately, public attitudes toward childcare and early education services became polarised. In the public domain, popular opinion has depicted childcare as unacceptable or at best a necessary evil. This is clearly evidenced in the popular literature and popular press in which parents using childcare have been depicted as having inappropriate priorities or as uncaring (Manne, 2006) and childcare portrayed as harmful (Leunig, 1995; Biddulph, 2006; Fox 2008; Sunday Mail, 2008).

Negative views have also been found to be prevalent among pre-service teachers in early education degree programs. Four studies to date have documented such negative attitudes. Field and Varga (1997) and Hill and Veale (1997) examined attitudes to maternal work and use of childcare, the former in a sample of Canadian students and the latter in an Australian sample. Both studies reported that students held negative attitudes about maternal work and childcare, and the authors expressed concern that such attitudes may adversely

affect performance as professionals when these students entered the early childhood services workforce. Two more recent studies by Ailwood and Boyd (2007) and Vajda (2005) report negative attitudes consistent with the earlier studies. These findings, based on Australian samples, suggest little change across the 13 years from the first cited studies and they raise questions about how attitudes might be changed, and willingness to work in childcare improved, among those undertaking early childhood education degrees.

The current study asks how these barriers might be overcome and how the willingness of degree-qualified teachers to work in childcare could be improved. Specifically the study asked whether the experience of a practicum in a childcare setting can positively influence these views. Vajda's (2005) study provided evidence that the experience of a practicum may improve attitudes to childcare in a study of eight pre-service teachers. Prior to practicum experience, interview data indicated that the students saw maternal employment as a necessity but viewed childcare negatively. They were reluctant to participate in a childcare practicum. However, after they had experienced the practicum the students reported more positive attitudes. The mechanisms used to explain the findings focussed on observations of child learning experiences, but there are other potential explanations. Recent studies in childcare settings suggest that high-quality pedagogical practice and leadership can be a motivation for students undertaking a degree in education, and elucidate opportunities for professional leadership and creativity in the childcare sector (Hujula, 2004; Jordan, 2008; Thorpe, et al, 2010). The current study, like Vajda (2005), measured the attitudes toward use of childcare before and after practicum experience but additionally directly assessed willingness to work in the childcare sector. The study examined a cohort of students undertaking a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), and used quantitative analyses, alongside qualitative accounts, to assess a range of factors experienced during a childcare practicum that might affect attitudes to employment in the sector.

Method

Participants

Students in their third year of a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree (n = 69) at an Australian university were recruited during a unit related to teaching and practicum in childcare. Participants completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of semester to capture their attitudes to paid work and childcare before and after the coursework teaching and practicum experiences. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a prior qualitative study (Ailwood & Boyd, 2007) and a derived theoretical model (Thorpe et al,

2011). Pilot testing was conducted within early childhood education students from a different year level in the same university course.

Measures

The questionnaire contained the same scales at both time points (pre and post), with the post-practicum survey including additional ratings and open-ended questions about the placement and students' experiences. In addition to close-ended questions, open comment was invited generating qualitative textual data. The questionnaire comprised three parts: Demographics, Childcare Attitudes (costs and benefits of maternal employment, attitudes toward childcare, and judgements toward families using childcare) and Work in Childcare.

1. *Demographics*

Participants were asked for information on age, gender, number of children, use of childcare for own children, qualifications, experience working in the childcare sector and other forms of work with children, membership of professional organisations, childhood experience of non-parental care, and reasons for undertaking the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood).

2. *Childcare Attitudes*

Attitudes were assessed by the 28 item Costs and Benefits of Maternal Employment (BCME) scale (Greenberger,et al, 1988). Costs to both mother and child were assessed with 14 statements. A sample statement was 'young children whose mothers work are likely to feel insecure'. All items were rated on a Likert scale of 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Higher scores indicated that the student perceived greater costs from maternal employment. Cronbach's alphas for this sample indicated high reliability: .857 (pre) and .901 (post). Benefits of maternal employment to both mother and child were measured with 14 statements. A sample statement was: 'children whose mothers work are more adaptable'. All items were rated on a Likert scale of 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Cronbach's alphas for this sample indicated high reliability: .823 (pre) and .893 (post). Higher scores indicated the student perceived greater benefit from maternal employment.

Attitudes toward childcare were assessed with six statements that described situations where childcare was beneficial to children's development. A sample statement was 'long day-care provides support for education and development'. Statements were rated on a Likert scale. Cronbach's alphas for this sample indicated high reliability: .679 (pre) and .819 (post). Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward the role of long day-care in children's development.

Judgements about the family who used long day-care were assessed by seven items that exemplified different types of families, for example, a single parent family, non-working mothers or fathers, or a dual-income family. Items were rated on a Likert scale of 1, preferable, 2 acceptable or 3, not acceptable. Higher scores indicated a more negative judgement of families using day-care.

3. Work in childcare

Students were asked for their willingness to work in long day-care before and after their practicum, with a single item 'would you work in centre-based long day-care after you get your degree?' Their preferences were rated as 1, definitely no, 2, preferable no, 3, possibly, and 4 definitely yes. Based on their responses, students were then separated into two groups, of willing and unwilling to work in childcare. The willing group had answered 'possibly' or 'definitely yes' to working in childcare, whilst the unwilling group had answered 'definitely no' or 'preferably no' to this item.

Students were then asked to rate workplace factors on whether these were incentives and barriers to working in childcare. The factors included: level of pay, flexibility, opportunities for leadership and status, with practicum experiences added after the practicum had been completed. Factors were rated as 1, strong barrier, 2, barrier, 3 unsure, 4, incentive or 5, strong incentive. Higher scores indicated that this factor was an incentive to working in childcare. Students were also asked for comments on specific barriers and compelling reasons to work in childcare.

Finally, students were asked more specific information about the characteristics of their placement centre, for example," was the centre for profit, corporate or a community centre". The students rated the practicum experience with 12 items, on a Likert scale of 1, very negative to 5, very positive. Items included the ethos of the centre, leadership of the director, the ability of the group leader and a rating of the overall experience. Higher scores indicated that the practicum experience was more positive for the student.

Procedure

Data collection allowed students complete anonymity. Students generated a code based on their mother's maiden name (first three letters) and their mobile phone number (last three digits) to allow anonymity of response, yet linkage of the two questionnaires across two time points. The questionnaires were distributed by university lecturers where time was given for completion. Questionnaires could be returned after the lecture or at a later date in a sealed enveloped. In line with the Australian guidelines for ethical conduct of research, and the

permissions of the Human Ethics Research Committee of the university, participation was anonymous, voluntary and not attached in any way to the student's coursework outcomes. Analyses were limited to students who had provided complete information at both time periods (n=30).

Design and analysis

The study addressed two research questions. First it asked if, as a student group, attitudes to childcare and willingness to work in childcare settings increased following practicum in a childcare setting. To this end we conducted a repeated measures design, with mean changes in attitudes and willingness to work in childcare assessed using related t-tests across the two time periods. The 'pre-practicum' (pre) data was collected when students were recruited at the start of the semester, whilst the 'post-practicum' (post) data was collected at the end of the same semester. Second, the association of individual differences in attitude (i.e. positive change, negative change, or unchanged) and willingness to work in childcare (willing or unwilling) and features of the practicum centre were examined. Where date defining features of the centres were categorical (e.g. commercial, corporate, community) non-parametric chi-square analyses were employed to assess any statistical associations. Where features of the centre were ordinal, Likert scales (e.g. student ratings of the leadership) parametric tests of difference and related t-tests were employed to assess mean change across the pre- and post-practicum period.

Qualitative data were analysed to provide textual accounts of the student's experiences. Detailed deductive thematic analyses, guided by a theoretical model of factors affecting attitudes to childcare (see Thorpe et al, 2011) was undertaken. Inductive analyses were not appropriate given the qualitative data collection was embedded within a structured questionnaire format and not open-ended interview. Additionally, as the qualitative data were collected anonymously, the validity of the analyses could not be checked by respondents, and limited analyses to deductive methods where validity checking was based on convergence of quantitative and qualitative accounts. All comments align with the student's quantitative rating.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Demographics

At the start of the semester, most students (n = 55, 80%) enrolled in the third year of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) completed the first questionnaire on their attitudes to paid work and childcare. The cohort was almost entirely female (96%), ranged in age from

19 to 36 years (M = 21.1 years, *SD* = 3.2 years) and most (84.1%) had entered the degree directly from school. Of the cohort two students (2.95%) held a previous degree and nine (13.1%) had a technical education qualification in childcare. At the end of the semester, less than half of the cohort (n = 30, 43%) completed the second questionnaire, although attrition analyses found that there were no differences in the demographic characteristics of those who did and did not complete both questionnaires.

Attitudes to childcare

Figure 1 shows how attitudes toward paid work and childcare changed after the practicum. As a group there were no changes in the judgements students made about which family types should use childcare, indicating they viewed the use of childcare no differently after working in the centres. Students were more likely to become more positive about the role of childcare in children's education and development. When the change in the costs and benefits of maternal employment were considered, however, a more mixed pattern occurred. These items focus on the positive and negative of maternal work and use of childcare. After their practicum, students rated the costs of maternal work and use of childcare as lower. However they also they also rated the benefits of childcare as lower i.e. they saw it as less harmful but also of limited benefit to mother and child.

Qualitative accounts provided by students expanded on their attitudes to childcare. These showed more positive change in attitudes than negative following practicum based on the belief that childcare benefitted development. For example, student 9, evidenced positive change

> *I think that putting children in childcare anywhere before they are 1 year old is unacceptable, but I understand this must be/is the case for many parents. (student 9 pre-practicum)*

> *It's a very enriching experience for young children. I believe it allows children to explore their world socially, physically and emotionally in childcare. It definitely supports a child's learning & development. (student 9, post-practicum)*

Though fewer in number, some students did not change their attitude or became more negative about childcare. For example student 1 provided evidence of increased negativity

When a child is at this age a mother should only work part-time - not full time!
Especially if she is a single parent. Childcare is good for social development if the
mother is not a very good mother. (student 1, pre-practicum).

I believe that for the first three years if at least one parent is working full time the
other should not work or only work part time. I do not believe a child 3 or under
should attend full time childcare, over 4 is ok. A single parent should not work full
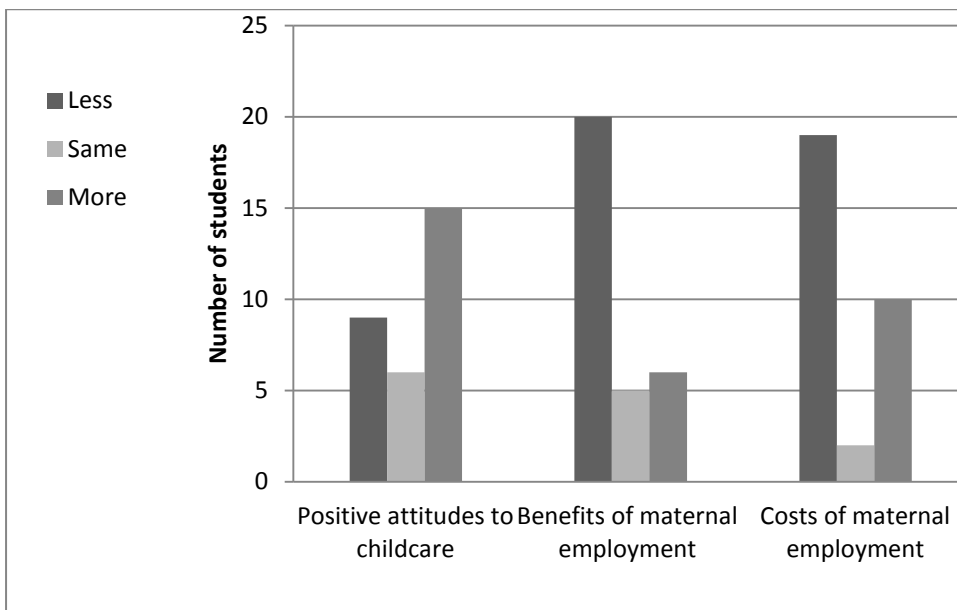*time - the government supports them. (student 1, post-practicum)*

Figure 1. Changes in attitudes toward paid work and childcare after practicum

Willingness to work in childcare

There was an increased number of students who were willing to work in childcare after their
practicum (from 14 to 18) and a decline in those unwilling (from 16 to 12), as shown in
Figure 2. The changes in student preferences came from three who became unwilling and
seven who became willing to work in childcare after their practicum. Cross-tabulation with
chi square analysis found that the change approached statistical significance, $X^2(1) = 3.772$, *p*
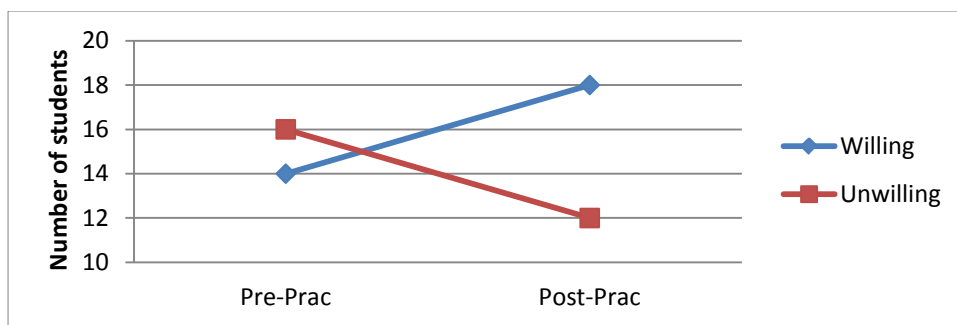= .052.

Figure 2. Changes in student willingness to work in childcare before and after their practicum

When the willing and unwilling students reported on their practicum experiences, there were no significant differences in how positive or negative these experiences were rated by either group, based on the type of centre (i.e. for profit or community based), the ethos of the centre or the characteristics of the director or the group leader. The leadership of the director, which approached significance, was of interest, although the small size of the sample limited the generalisability of this finding, Specifically, the students who were willing to work in long day-care were more positive about the leadership of their centre's director (M [willing] = 4.11 v M [unwilling] = 3.54, $t(28) = 1.648$, $p = .101$) . Qualitative comments regarding the nature of their practicum experiences indicated the importance of teacher modelling for the students:

> *I had never been in a childcare setting prior - enjoyed the experience due to having a great teacher to model from. (student 29, willing)*

> *Planning and evaluation was very basic or non-existent. Cleaning and other mandatory tasks took priority. Children experienced little variation and little time outdoors. Outdoor area very small and not very stimulating. Group leader very slow to warm up to me - sensed confusion with power relations. (student 30, unwilling)*

When barriers and incentives to work in childcare were examined, there were significant differences between those willing and unwilling to work in childcare, as shown in Table 1. Notably, the students who did not wish to work in long day-care centres rated all these workplace factors as barriers (i.e. score of 3 or less), whilst those students who were willing to do so considered at least half of the factors as incentives to working in childcare centres.

Working conditions	Willing Mean (SD)	Unwilling Mean (SD)	$t(28)$
Levels of pay	1.56 (0.51)	1.50 (0.52)	0.289
Holidays	2.22 (0.94)	1.58 (0.79)	1.933[†]
Hours of work	2.44 (0.92)	1.58 (0.79)	2.645*
Status	2.72 (0.83)	2.42 (0.79)	1.008
'Childcare is not education'	3.06 (0.94)	2.92 (0.90)	0.404
Prior experience of childcare	3.11 (0.83)	3.00 (0.60)	0.397
Flexibility	3.12 (1.17)	2.25 (1.14)	1.993[†]
Work tasks	3.41 (0.80)	2.42 (1.17)	2.741*
Experience on practicum	3.72 (1.02)	2.75 (1.22)	2.372*
Opportunity for leadership	3.89 (0.68)	3.00 (1.04)	2.838**

[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Note. Higher scores indicate that the working condition is considered an incentive to working in childcare

Table 1. Factors that act as barriers or incentives toward intentions to working in childcare for students who are willing or unwilling to work in centre-based long day care

As shown in Table 1, flexibility, types of work and opportunities for leadership were all rated as significantly greater incentives to working in childcare centres and the quality of the practicum experience was more of an incentive for the willing group and a barrier for the unwilling group. These results amplify the positive ratings for the importance of the leadership of directors and group leaders and are supported by the students' comments about their experiences. One student summed this up well,

> *I would possibly work in childcare if I could chose who I worked with (e.g. other*
> *educational professionals, my uni colleagues) and had the choice of pedagogical*
> *decisions, then I would work there (student 21, willing)*

Poorer experiences lessened the likelihood that a student would choose to work in childcare centres, which highlighted the importance of quality supervision of students. One student, who began as willing but became unwilling, noted that

> *I went in with high expectations hoping that it would be a full educational experience*
> *but it wasn't. The staff cared for the children but there was no meaningful, interest*
> *based learning. I understand that it will take early childhood education teachers to*

change childcare, but I am not enthusiastic about changing it to make enough of a difference (student 14, unwilling).

The quality of the centre's philosophy and the opportunity to provide educational experiences for children were given as reasons for both working and not working in childcare. As one student indicated

It depends on the centre and their values, if I found a centre that I believed in and that believed in me, I would be able to teach there (student 14, willing).

When students had a supportive experience they saw themselves as engaged within a professional environment. Such experiences changed their willingness to work in childcare and they could see opportunities to provide rich developmental and educational experiences for children and infants.

It was very rewarding; I was treated like a professional, not just a student. I was very impressed with the staff and the functioning of the centre (student 10, willing).

Discussion

Recent directions in ECEC policy favour the provision of high quality education experiences, regardless of place of delivery, and are focussed on the child's right to positive life chances regardless of parental decisions about participation in the workforce (OECD, 2006; Ishimine et al, 2009). As part of this policy there is a drive to increase the number of degree qualified teachers working in childcare settings. However, previous studies indicate that those undertaking a degree in early childhood education have negative attitudes towards working in childcare settings (Field & Varga, 1997; Hill & Veale, 1997; Vajda, 2005; Ailwood & Boyd, 2007) and a preference for other career options afforded by this degree (Thorpe et al, 2011). To date there have been no studies directly examining willingness of those undertaking a degree to work in childcare settings. The current study examined factors that might improve willingness to work in childcare following a practicum in a childcare setting. The study asked two questions: first, whether the experience of a childcare practicum affects the student's attitudes to childcare and, second, whether the experience of practicum affects willingness to work in childcare.

Attitudes to maternal employment and childcare

The results of the current study are based on a considerably larger sample than that of the only previous study (Vajda, 2005), but are consistent in findings that attitudes to childcare

are indeed influenced by practicum experiences. A group analysis showed a trend in which attitudes to childcare improved after the experience of practicum. Similarly there was a trend in which students rated childcare as having fewer emotional and structural costs to mother and child. However, students also rated childcare as having fewer emotional and structural benefits to mother and child following practicum. Analysis of qualitative comments regarding costs and benefits, previously reported (Thorpe et al, 2011), indicate that many of these students saw benefits to childcare only under particular conditions that related to the hours of attendance, the age of entry, the quality of the centre and family need. These qualified responses, related to the effects of childcare, align with research evidence (e.g. NICHD, 2005) and teaching within both child development and childcare fieldwork studies undertaken in the student's university coursework. The Benefits and Costs of Maternal Employment scale (Greenberger et al, 1988) used here asked about costs and benefits of childcare to parents and children but did not distinguish childcare in terms of quality, nor between full or part-time attendance, and did not specify the ages of children on which judgement should be made. In this context it may be that students are less willing to endorse benefits but more willing to concede lack of harm.

Though there was a trend towards more positive attitudes following practicum there was considerable individual variation. Some student's attitudes remained unchanged while some became less positive about childcare. These differences related to the practicum experience (see Thorpe et al, 2011) and were reflected in the qualitative accounts. Those who were more positive reported seeing developmental benefits for children and positive pedagogical models.

Willingness to work in childcare settings

Direct assessments of willingness to consider working in a childcare setting were also influenced by the quality of practicum. The results indicate a trend, which approached statistical significance, in which students' willingness to work in long day-care settings increased following practicum. Our results did not show that there were any differences in practicum experience related to the location of the practicum (e.g. commercial or community centres). This may be explained by our relatively small sample size and further investigation on a larger sample would be necessary to ascertain whether practicum experience varies across centres with different funding models. Similarly we found few associations between the reported willingness of students to work in childcare and their ratings of features (e.g. ethos) of the centres. Again this may be because the sample was too small to tease out which

elements about the centres were influential. The key finding is that individual differences in willingness to work in childcare settings following practicum were statistically associated with the models provided by pedagogical leaders, both directors and teachers, within centres. Commensurately, students' qualitative responses provided detailed accounts of the importance of the practicum experience and specifically named teacher models as influential in changing their views, whether positively or negatively.

Implications and limitations

The current study suggests that positive experiences of childcare provided in practicum can improve the valuing of childcare and promote willingness to work in childcare settings. Notably it draws attention to the importance of pedagogical leadership through modelling and teaching within the practicum settings. The findings also direct attention to the role taken by universities in preparing students for practicum and working alongside staff in early education settings situated in childcare.

A key message of the findings presented here is that the practicum settings should exemplify high-quality pedagogical practice and model current evidence-based practices that optimise child learning and well-being. In particular, directors and teachers who provide mentorship were identified as key influences by the students. These results align with those in a study of student teachers in Finland in which expertise in childcare pedagogies was cited as positive evidence of leadership (Hujala, 2004). Observations of such leadership may help overcome student teachers' fears about the low status of childcare roles, through recognition of the educative potential of high-quality childcare teaching. A recent study in the United States of America clearly indicates that vocational commitment to early education, and not external incentives, were the motivation for longevity of employment in childcare among degree-qualified staff (Gable, et al, 2007).

Models of distributive or shared leadership in early childhood services offer opportunities for professionally fulfilling pedagogic leadership (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Jordan, 2008). In this study the opportunity for leadership was identified by students as the strongest incentive for working in childcare. Additionally, other incentives were identified by students during the practicum experience. In keeping with prior reports (Jordan, 2008; Thorpe et al, 2011) the students in this study identified opportunities for creativity as an incentive and compared these to the restrictions and outcome pressures of school-based education. The findings present the challenge to locate the highest quality placements and support the possibility of strategies such as those adopted previously in New Zealand to

implement centres of innovation (Jordan, 2008). In these selected centres, where leadership was distributed to teachers as well as designated managers, teachers reported feelings of empowerment and pleasure in pedagogic decision-making and attributed their successes to the support of formal leaders and team colleagues. Such centres may serve as positive models for pre-service teachers.

Teaching in the University setting and modelling of university staff who have experience in childcare settings is also important. Ailwood and Boyd (2007) reported a positive impact on student teachers of pedagogic leadership provided by academic staff who were experienced in high quality childcare. There is a need for close partnerships between university and centre pedagogic leaders, to link theory and quality practice, and to identify leadership opportunities for teachers within childcare. Within a distributive leadership model, universities could contribute to childcare quality through sponsorship of a pedagogic mentoring program linked to the practicum. This would extend staff capacity building beyond a limited number of centres of excellence, to influence pedagogic quality across a wider range of childcare centres.

Given current policy directions the demand to overcome barriers and increase the number of qualified teachers in childcare settings is pressing. To date there is limited evidence about how to achieve this. The current study has made a contribution in providing the largest sample to date looking at the effects of practicum. However the available data was based on only 30 full data sets and was not sufficient to examine in detail the contribution of characteristics of centres. The study was based on self-report with only two time-points of measurement. Qualitative data were limited to short written comments. A more detailed study of cohort of students would be valuable in understanding student responses while a detailed study of effective pedagogical leadership, both in childcare contexts and university settings, would inform practice that enhances acceptance of parental rights to choice, improves attitudes to childcare and delivers more students who want to participate in providing high-quality educational experiences for children in childcare settings.

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