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Towards self-authorship in child care students: Implications for working with children and their families

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Abstract

Using self authorship as a theoretical framework, this chapter examines the relationship between personal epistemology and beliefs about children’s learning for students studying to be child care workers in Australia. Scenario-based interviews were used to investigate how students’ views of knowledge, identity and relationships with others were related to beliefs about how children learn. Implications for vocational education are discussed.
Background

A large body of research now demonstrates that the formal pre-service education of early childhood teachers is one significant way in which quality child care and outcomes for children can be improved. In particular, the beliefs which early childhood teachers hold about relationships with children seem to be related to beliefs about children’s learning and personal epistemology (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2004). This chapter examines the relationship between personal epistemology and beliefs about children’s learning for students studying to be child care workers in Australia. We focus on self-authorship theory to understand students’ sense of ownership of knowledge, identity and relationships with others, in the development of their epistemological beliefs (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). In this paper we foreground the nature and development of students’ epistemological beliefs. We take the view that a mature personal epistemology is a prerequisite to being an effective child care practitioner.

Over the last 30 years, a strong research literature has developed in the area of personal epistemology. Personal epistemological beliefs are those beliefs that individuals hold about the nature of knowing and knowledge (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). From a developmental tradition, many researchers such as Perry (1970), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, (1986), Baxter Magolda (1994), and Kuhn and Weinstock (2002) have demonstrated that individuals change their beliefs over time in a similar way, often as a result of educational experiences.

According to Kuhn and Weinstock (2002), at first individuals hold absolutist epistemological beliefs about knowing. This means that knowledge is viewed as “right or wrong”, and not needing to be examined because the source of knowledge simply transmits the “right” information to the individual. Next, individuals with multiplist epistemological beliefs consider knowledge to be founded upon personal opinions. From this perspective,
knowledge remains personal, intuitive and unexamined. Finally, individuals with evaluativistic beliefs about knowledge, like individuals who hold multiplist beliefs, acknowledge that knowledge is personally constructed. However, an evaluativist weighs up evidence to construct this understanding. Knowledge is considered to be evolving, tentative and evidenced-based.

Personal epistemology and beliefs about learning

The personal epistemology research literature has demonstrated that core beliefs about knowing and knowledge influence learning. Brownlee (2001) found, for example, that student teachers with evaluativistic beliefs were more likely to use deep approaches to learning that were focused on making meaning. Other research has also demonstrated links between epistemological beliefs and learning (e.g., Hammer, 2003). Links also exist between epistemological beliefs and teachers’ beliefs about children’s learning (Doverborg & Pramling, 1996).

Brownlee and Berthelsen (2004) showed that child care workers’ epistemological beliefs were related to beliefs about children’s learning. Child care workers with evaluativistic beliefs believed that children learn through a process of actively constructing knowledge. Child care workers with subjectivist epistemological beliefs were more likely to think that children learn by modeling behaviors of others and being active (e.g., through play). However, we know that children in constructivist child-centered environments are more likely to have increased motivation and increased problem solving skills compared with children in teacher-centered teaching environments in which teachers take a transmissive stance (Daniels & Shumow, 2003).

Self-authorship: Beyond personal epistemological beliefs
While it is important to consider epistemological beliefs and their connections with learning, our global communities require us to interact in ways that go beyond epistemology to encompass respectful and supportive interactions with others. This is considered within self-authorship theory. Self-authorship is central to adult thinking and involves the ability to gather and critique information in the context of one’s own personal beliefs (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005). From this perspective, the self is central to development and learning in higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2003). Self-authorship involves a holistic view of the learner (Meszaros, 2007) with a process of meaning making that includes epistemological, interpersonal (social relationships) and intrapersonal (personal values and identity) dimensions (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). This means that in order to think in complex ways one must be able to evaluate multiple perspectives (epistemological dimension) in the context of understanding one’s personal beliefs and values (intrapersonal dimension), and building healthy social relationships (interpersonal dimension). The construction of knowledge must involve the weighing up of both formal and personal knowledge in social contexts. According to Meszaros (2007), such an approach to learning may provide a platform on which to build a culture change in higher and further education.

This study aimed to investigate self-authorship in child care students in the context of their professional training courses to work in child care settings. It also explored how the development of self-authorship was related to their beliefs about children’s learning.

Method

In 2007, all students completing a Diploma of Children's Services at four vocational education institutes, located in a large metropolitan area in Australia, were invited to participate in a large federally funded research project¹. A total of 47 students from the two

¹ This research was funded by the Australian Research Council 2006-2008
year Diploma course agreed to participate in the research that involved a semi-structured interview that included reflection about a typical behavior management scenario that might occur in a child care setting. The Diploma of Children's Services enables students to work as group leaders in child care centers in Australia. A group leader is expected to take responsibility for the overall management of a group of children in a child care program. All of the modules in the diploma course are practical in their focus, although there is also a requirement to show an understanding of how theories of children’s learning and teaching in early childhood programs is enacted in teaching practice.

The participants

Of the 47 students who participated in the research, 43 were female. Thirty-eight of the students were under 25 years of age. Most students (n = 32) had completed high school. Twelve students held post-secondary qualifications, such as certificates and diplomas, from discipline areas such as business and hospitality. Most students (n = 32) had no previous work experience in child care settings.

The interviews

A common way of investigating epistemological beliefs is through the use of semi-structured interviews (e.g., Belenky et al., 1986). However, Brownlee, Boulton-Lewis and Berthelsen (2008) reported that many students had difficulties with some interview questions that explore personal epistemology. In an effort to make more concrete and less abstract the ideas about knowledge and learning, we embedded in the semi-structured interview questions a common practice scenario that students might encounter in their field experiences in child care settings. The use of scenarios to explore learners’ perspectives has an extensive history in educational psychology, providing opportunity for learners to deal with big ideas that are significant to practice (Sudzina, 1997). Learners consider the situation and the range of
perspectives from which it can be understood, as well as the different ways to respond (Dockett & Tegel, 1995, 1996). This approach was based on the work of Stacey, Brownlee and Thorpe (2005) and Nist and Holschuch (2005) who noted that participants are able to discuss their views more cogently when a familiar scenario is presented. The audio-taped interviews were 30 to 60 minutes in duration and were transcribed verbatim.

The students in the current study were interviewed using the following scenario (drawn from Stacey et al., 2005).

Daniel Kennedy is 4 years old and he has just arrived with his Mum at his child care center. He is generally very sociable and plays immediately with the other children when dropped off. Today, however, he holds onto Mum’s leg, cries loudly, and will not let her go. Mum is becoming upset by this and some other children begin to cry. Mrs. Bennett, the center director, takes hold of Daniel and says, “Just go quickly.” His mother does so and Daniel became more upset and hits Mrs. Bennett.

Do you think that this was the right action by the center director in this situation? What would you do? Sometimes people talk about there being “right answers” or “truth” in child care practice. What are your views? Do you agree with the idea that there are no right answers in child care practice? Do think that anybody’s opinion is as good as another?

Daniel’s behavior did not improve throughout the morning. It escalated when he bit another child. The group leader began talking to Daniel about this incident. However, Mrs. Bennett, who happened to be in the room, thought that this was insufficient. She took Daniel by the arm and took him to the naughty mat and told him to stay there. The group leader was worried about Daniel and tried to speak to Mrs. Bennett.
Mrs. Bennett said, “Experts say that you must be firm with children every time and use time out. It will make him behave better.” The group leader was too nervous to raise her objections with Mrs. Bennett. She was unsure about the right way to manage a child in this situation but she remembered reading things like what Mrs. Bennett was saying in textbooks. She thought to herself, “Experts must be right, mustn’t they? It doesn’t feel right though.”

What do you think is going on in the group leader’s mind? Could the textbooks and Mrs. Bennett be wrong? Do you trust the opinions of experts?

How do you learn? How do you go about learning something that you think is important to know that would help you to be a good group leader? How do you know when you have learnt something? So can you tell me what you think learning is? What are the most important ways in which your current course is helping you to learn about child care practice?

How do you think children learn? Can you think of an experience you have had with a child where you really noticed that he or she had learnt something? How do you know when a child has learnt something?

Analyzing interviews

We used a deductive (theory-driven) approach to analyze the interviews and to categorize responses that described students’ personal epistemology, while an inductive (data-driven) analytic approach was used to analyze students’ beliefs about children’s learning and the intrapersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of self-authorship theory.

The deductive approach was used to analyze personal epistemologies because there is a strong research tradition in this field and categories to describe beliefs have emerged consistently in the literature over the last 30 years. The categories used for the classification of epistemological beliefs in this analysis were: complex evaluativistic thinking, practical
evaluativistic thinking, subjectivist thinking, and objectivist thinking.

In contrast, individuals’ beliefs about children’s learning were not coded deductively because of a paucity of research into beliefs about children’s learning. Instead, inductive analysis was used to indentify categories in the data. Beliefs about children’s learning were classified according to the level of understanding demonstrated that children’s learning is a process of making meaning and that children are competent and active processors of information. Similarly, inductive analysis was also used to identify categories about the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of self-authorship theory that reflected, for the intrapersonal dimension, a sense of a professional identity in being a teacher of young children and, for the interpersonal dimension, the level of evidence reflecting respect for diversity and others’ values, including those of family and children, as well as for colleagues in their professional practice.

We used dialogic reliability checking to ensure credible findings (Åkerlind, 2005). A second researcher, who was skilled in epistemological beliefs interview analysis, was asked to analyze a sample of responses using the established categories. Agreement was reached on 94% of the beliefs about children’s learning categories and 88% of the categories on the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. When disagreement occurred differences were resolved through discussion.

Discussion of findings

The interviews revealed four main profiles of self-authorship beliefs. The findings are presented through these group profiles that represent belief frameworks. These profiles are labeled according to the level of epistemological beliefs held (complex evaluativism; practical evaluativism; subjectivist thinking, and objectivist thinking). Each of these profiles will be
discussed, in turn, and related to the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of self-authorship, as well as to beliefs about children’s learning.

Complex evaluativistic thinking profile

Fifteen students described knowledge as tentative, evolving and needing to be backed up with theoretical evidence. These beliefs are referred to as complex evaluativism. One student who held this profile said:

Everybody is going to have a different opinion. You can talk to that person and work out why your opinions are different in something. It may change your own opinion by listening to other people if you agree with what they were saying and the way they supported it. You can trust experts if there’s evidence to support it and if there’s a few different studies or experts who have the same opinion.

It is of interest that although evidence, in particular theoretical evidence, is important in justifying an opinion, this student clearly indicated that informed opinions still had to resonate with her own beliefs.

The students who held this profile believed that there were no “right answers” in child care. They indicated that children, parents, staff and centers varied enormously and this diversity has to be taken into account in relation to teaching practices with children.

If it’s like about how to bring up a child or how to teach a child, there are no right or wrong answers because people have different ways of teaching their children.

Such responses indicated that students were aware of multiple perspectives and the need to work with diversity in child care settings. A sense of professional identity was evident as well as recognition of the importance of respecting different family and professional values.

Students with a complex evaluativistic profile also described children’s learning as a process of making meaning. For example:
They learn through their own experiences; they learn through experimentation; exploring different items and they figure it out in their own way. No matter what they’ve got in front of them they’re going to figure out something they can do with that item and you may not have even thought of it. I don’t know… they figure it out in their own way and usually it is so amazing what they can do with these things.

Such a view of children’s learning indicates that children are competent and active processors of information. It is also evident that linking knowledge to one’s personal beliefs is an important component of learning even for children.

The students who were considered to hold a complex evaluativistic profile if they analyzed information to arrive at their own opinions using research and theory.

Practical evaluativistic thinking profile

Sixteen students had profiles described as practical evaluativism. Their epistemological beliefs focused on analyzing practices rather than being informed by theoretical ideas. For example, the following quote relates to how the student would use others’ opinions to construct knowledge:

Probably through discussions and just letting them explain their own beliefs and how to deal with it; then incorporating how you would like to (do it), your own beliefs, and then coming up with something that incorporates both your and their ideas.

These beliefs do not reflect complex evaluativistic beliefs in which theory and practice are critically analyzed to develop evidence-based knowledge. Students in this group talked about how they would critically analyze the practices of others, although not from the perspective of research and theory. In terms of the intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship these students reflect what Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) describe as being in transition, or at the crossroads, between following formulas and self-authorship. They talked about relying on
their personal beliefs in the assessment of “experts’ practice”. In terms of the interpersonal
dimension of self-authorship, students with practical evaluativistic profiles emphasized
respect for others in their professional practice. They indicated that differences between
children, parents, staff and child care centers meant that they could not rely on having right
answers and that varied perspectives needed to be valued and respected. For example:

I suppose you could say there are no right answers … it depends, really, on the question.
Right answers, if it’s coming down to regulations or rules or something like that, then
yes, there’s always a definite right answer. If it comes down to how you deal with a
child whose showing separation anxiety, there is not a right answer. It depends
completely on the child. It depends on the parent. It also depends on the carer and the
center in which you are working.

The focus on skills and strategies rather than theory has important implications for the
way in which students construct child care practice; how they evaluate the practices of experts
in their field; their beliefs about how children learn; and how they interact with children in
their child care programs. Rather than examining theory and research, these students
evaluated strategies they observed in their professional practice.

These students’ views of children’s learning present an interesting variation to what was
found in the previous profile of complex evaluativism. They talked about children’s learning
typically as active and based on observing others around them. However, there was no clear
indication of children being competent processors of meaning as was the case for those who
espoused complex evaluativistic beliefs. For example:

The other day I planned this activity for this particular child, just like giving them more
experiences. They seemed to become engrossed in what they were doing and learned a
lot more because they had so many more things available. I was supportive as well as
allowing them to do their own thing and build their skills.
This quote exemplifies the typical view that children learn by being active but there is no evidence that children construct their own knowledge.

Subjectivist thinking profile

Fourteen students had a belief profile that described subjectivist epistemological beliefs in which knowledge is based on one’s personal opinions. From this perspective, knowledge is predominantly intuitive, based on feelings, and does not need to be supported with evidence - neither practical nor theoretical. For example:

Look at other people’s opinions; use it to see where other people are coming from. Have a more open view on what people’s opinions are. You don’t necessarily have to take on their opinion, but you have to show that you have respect for how they feel about situations and, if you’re taking care of their child, then to take their opinion into consideration.

These students did not talk about constructing their own beliefs so it is not clear how their professional identity was developing for teaching in child care contexts. They were not analyzing information or other opinions and so they did not talk about how other perspectives fitted with their own views.

Eleven of these students believed that on some issues there may be absolute knowledge on what is right in child care practice, while on other issues, personal judgments need to be made (no right answers). These students held what appeared to be contradictory beliefs. The beliefs considered to be absolute reflected the importance of adhering to the regulations and licensing requirements set by regulatory authorities. Developmentally, this is a transitional phase for these students as they seek to find a balance about how their personal knowledge about good practice sits with their recognition of their responsibilities to meet regulations.

The other three students who held a subjectivist thinking profile took an absolutist position
that experts provide right answers that inform child care practice and did not acknowledge the importance of a personal construction of meaning.

As was evident for the previous two thinking profiles, most of these students believed that it was impossible to rely on absolute knowledge in child care because children, parents, staff and centers varied extensively and these perspectives needed to be respected. This suggests that they valued relationships with others in the child care context.

These students typically described children’s learning as based on observation and being active:

Children learn from experiences by actually doing things, you know by hands on, getting in there and trying things.

These views of children’s learning do not give any clear indication that children are competent constructors of meaning. The focus is on repeating what has been observed or simply being active in some way (e.g., investigating, experimenting, and playing).

Objectivist thinking profile

There were two students whose beliefs about knowing and knowledge were objectivist in nature. They believed that childcare practice was based only on “black and white” knowledge. This is an absolute position that experts can supply the “right answers” about good practice in child care. Personal construction of meaning about what is good practice based on evaluating theoretical and research evidence and reflecting on personal experience was not expressed in these students’ beliefs.

I mean there are specific right and wrongs. There might be some that are wrong but I think there are more that have got a yes or a no answer than ones that are a maybe.

Their views demonstrated a clear lack of focus on active construction of meaning. This view was also reflected in their descriptions of children’s learning as observing and modeling.
others around them. For example:

They’ll imitate mum and dad, what they do through play or what they’ve seen their
teacher do … whatever they have come into contact with they’ll use that.

There was no discussion of children needing being competent processors of information
to construct their own knowledge. There was also no discussion of their personal beliefs
(intrapersonal dimension). Similar to subjectivist thinking, these students did not talk about
their own beliefs possibly because they were not focused on analysis of other perspectives and
how these might fit with their own views. They also did not talk about the interpersonal
dimension of self-authorship.

Implications

Students who held evaluativist profiles (practical, $n = 16$, and complex, $n = 15$) described knowing as a process of analyzing other perspectives. While these students often agreed that all opinions needed to be respected, there was a clear sense that knowledge needed to be justified by analyzing opinions in relation to other perspectives, including their own. Even though students with practical evaluativist thinking frameworks may have been more concerned with practice than theory, there was still a clear indication that practical knowledge needed to be evaluated rather than simply accepted as was the case for students with subjectivist profiles ($n = 14$) or objectivist profiles ($n = 2$). Individuals with both subjectivist and objectivist frameworks did not focus on actively evaluating information to develop their knowledge base for practice.

What is also clear is that students who evaluate information in the light of their own beliefs hold more sophisticated views about children’s learning. Complex evaluativistic thinkers, in particular, are more likely to describe children as competent constructors rather than receivers of knowledge. A teacher with evaluativist beliefs is more likely to view the
meaning of teaching and the roles that teachers have in relation to the construction of meaning. On the other hand, a teacher with objectivist beliefs may see their role as transmitting knowledge to children (Chan & Elliott, 2004). We still need to investigate how such beliefs are enacted in child care practice. However, these preliminary findings suggest that complex epistemologies are related to constructivist views about children’s learning which are considered to underpin the provision of quality learning experiences in child care settings. Effective teachers in child care model appropriate language and behavior and also provide children with experiences that will enable them to derive meaning from these experiences (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

An interesting finding in this study was the important role played by personal beliefs in the process of learning and knowing. Students with evaluativistic thinking frameworks (both complex and practical) described how they analyzed others’ perspectives in the light of their own beliefs. There was a clear understanding that they could not simply accept someone else’s opinions or practices but that they had to analyze information and connect with what they personally believed. This demonstrated that students are finding and using their own professional voice and values related to the child care practice (intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship). However, this was not the case for those students with subjectivist and objectivist thinking profiles. These students did not discuss the need to link knowledge to personal beliefs in their responses, possibly because they were not focused on analyses of others’ perspectives and how these might fit with their own views. These students could be described as displaying “pre-self-authorship” beliefs.

Self-authorship is dependent on healthy social relationships (interpersonal dimension). All but six students in the study indicated the importance of respect for diversity in children, parents, other staff and centers. This was reflected in the responses to the question, “Are there right answers in child care?” in which they recognized there could be no right answers in
child care practice because of diverse perspectives. However, whilst awareness is evident, our data does not provide any evidence of the enactment of these beliefs in practice. This is an area of research that needs to be further investigated. Students who articulated evaluativistic thinking (practical and complex) held sophisticated epistemological beliefs (epistemological dimension) and recognized the role of personal beliefs and values in knowing (intrapersonal dimension). It seems that all students, excluding those with objectivist beliefs were able to acknowledge the need to accommodate diverse perspectives (interpersonal dimension).

To promote self-authorship we need to focus on complex thinking which involves the three dimensions of self-authorship: evaluativistic thinking (epistemological dimension of self-authorship) in the context of maintaining personal beliefs and values (intrapersonal) and healthy social relationships (interpersonal). Self-authorship requires critical personal reflection. This theory may provide a way to promote a culture change in education (Meszaros, 2007). The notion of reflection, particularly how new knowledge is constructed in relation to existing personal beliefs, is important for teachers in the child care context. Learning in practice ideally involves an action-reflection-action cycle to promote effective practice (Boshuiizen, 2004). Child care professionals need to engage in reflection that goes beyond analyzing a range of different practices to also incorporate theoretical and research perspectives.

One way to promote such reflection is to ensure that assessment in professional preparation programs goes beyond the measurement of skills and competencies. Competency-based assessment that is mandated for vocational education programs in Australia does not require students to engage in extensive reflection. Assessment needs to challenge students including how to evaluate competing claims about knowledge and how different claims connect with the development of their own knowledge and how to apply it. As Boshuiizen (2004) suggests, we need to engage in further research about the nature of complex learning
in practical contexts. We argue that this may be accomplished through a focus on self-authorship. Further research using self-authorship theory to understand the development of the professional identity of teachers of young children in child care settings can provide the platform for understanding and promoting more critical reflection and the deep learning required to work effectively in child care contexts.
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