

## *Chapter Seven: Political Stuff*

*I just don't think we get involved in the politics of everything. (J, 15p13)*

### **Introduction**

The introduction of the Queensland Preparatory Year affected all services offering preschool and primary school education. It affected the public, from government departments and school governance boards to educators, ancillary staff, children and their families. New policies, procedures, guidelines and curriculum documents were developed, and some existing documents and protocols were modified. This political reform had a wide reach. It opened opportunities for industries such as construction companies, manufacturers, transport organisations and school product supply companies. As revealed earlier in this study, it also minimised competition by closing potential growth opportunities for childcare and kindergarten services. Commentary about the Preparatory reform was prevalent in the media and public space. Press releases by government departments, advocacy groups and organisations representing teachers or parents; newspaper, journal and magazine articles; radio commentary; online blogs and letters to newspaper editors all occurred throughout the length of this study.

Chapters Two and Three opened a discussion about the place of teacher aides, historically and currently, within the public and political arena. This chapter examines the nature of some texts within the political and public space more closely to further explore the lived experience of the teacher aides in my study.

The focus of my study is to provide deeper understandings of what it means to be a teacher aide working in a Preparatory classroom in Queensland Catholic schools. My intent in this chapter is not to undertake a comprehensive analysis of all departmental policies or media commentary. Consequently, I chose some policies developed by the QCEC, the Catholic Education Council and the Brisbane Catholic Education Office. More expansive documents include national reforms, frameworks and curricula developed by both state and federal governments. Alongside these documents, I include

media commentary and comments from websites and social media sights. Collectively, these texts afford broader insights into the nature of the socio-political context of the teacher aides' position from the beginning of the new Preparatory Year reform and through the whole data-collection period.

I began my search with the aides themselves, reflecting upon the meanings and insights brought to light in the previous chapters. My focus is on two key issues that arose from the aides' stories and my observations of their lived experiences: the consideration of safety and security with particular regard to building provisions and supervision procedures, and the nature of Preparatory curriculum and pedagogy. I explore the issues of safety and security first.

### **Safety and Security**

Within their life world, the aides were interconnected with people including children, teachers, colleagues, principals and parents; and spaces within their environment, for instance, classrooms, playgrounds, toilet blocks and storerooms. Underpinning these connections were protocols that directed or guided the aides' behaviours and responsibilities. These same protocols or policies could also offer the aides a sense of reciprocity, providing expectations about what the workplace would give back, for instance, award conditions and protection of rights.

Employees' actions in the workplace or, in many cases, outside the workplace affect the culture and professional perception of that organisation. A code of conduct sets out rules for how employees behave within an organisation. Codes of conduct are common workplace protocols and usually form part of the contractual agreement between the employer and the employees. The Catholic Education Archdiocese of Brisbane (CEAoB) *Code of Conduct* is designed to meet legal obligations contained in the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000* (Qld), and to comply with 'relevant provisions of the *Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Act 2001*' (CEAoB, 2008, p. 3). The policy asserts a commitment to safe and supportive learning environments to foster 'the dignity, self-esteem and integrity' (CEAoB, 2008, p. 3) of all employees and children.

Clearly aligned with the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld), and the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000* (Qld), the protection of children and the minimisation of the risk of harm are explicitly mandated throughout the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008). Staff are expected to ‘adhere to principles and practices of student protection as a fundamental responsibility’ (CEAoB, 2008, p. 4). They are expected to ‘take reasonable steps to protect students from a reasonably foreseeable risk of injury’ (CEAoB, 2008, p. 6). Similarly, child protection practices are specifically and distinctly presented in the *Student Protection Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2011), which states that the ‘intended outcome of this policy is that children and young people in our schools feel safe and are safe’ (Catholic Education Council, 2011, p. 3).

Although it is evident that the Catholic Education Council purposefully directs its employees to protect children from harm and purports safety, security and nurture as ‘fundamental human needs’ (Catholic Education Council, 2011, p. 3), issues of practice in schools still arise. The issue of toileting addressed earlier in this thesis brought to light critical safety concerns for aides, teachers and young children alike. I now wish to consider toileting procedures and the identified issues in relation to stated policy and school protocol.

### **Toileting procedures**

To recap from earlier discussions, most toilet facilities at the schools in my study were situated away from and out of the line of sight of each Preparatory classroom. The Brisbane Catholic Education website acknowledges that ‘some classrooms will not have dedicated toilets for prep children’ (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2010c, para. 10). Yet, assurances are given that ‘arrangements will be made for ease of access that are appropriate for the particular school site’ (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2010c, para. 10). At some schools, the toilet blocks were accessible to children of all year levels. In practical terms, this meant that children aged four and a half were accessing the same toilets as children aged up to 13 years. Often, the aides were alone with children in both male and female toilet blocks, out of sight of other staff. This practice left both the aides and children vulnerable and unprotected. Children could allege that an aide physically mistreated them. Similarly, an aide could be threatened or harmed, particularly by an older child. Older children hiding in the toilet block could hurt or bully younger

children. In half the schools in my study, four-year-old and five-year-old children were leaving classrooms on their own to access distant toilets. These practices continued for the duration of my study and most likely continue today. Two key problems arise from these school protocols: the risk of harm to both children and the aides, and the risk of professional security for the aides. These issues are at odds with the intent of the provision of safety and security asserted in the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008), the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Act 2000* (Qld), and the *Student Protection Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2011).

### ***Risk of harm***

Consistent with the aides' stories, both media reports and online blogs warned about the dangers of toileting procedures for Preparatory children. The Queensland Early Childhood Teachers' Association (ECTA) website offered a summary of responses from its Prep Alert blog in February 2007, two weeks into the state-wide rollout of the Preparatory Year. Common concerns centred on the the location of toilets away from classrooms. This not only increased the amount of time absorbed by toileting procedures, but also resulted in more toileting accidents in the classroom or in transit to the toilets. Additionally, the difficulty of supporting children's safe access and use of toilets without adequate teacher aide time was raised. Accounts of children wandering school grounds and, in some cases, leaving the school after visiting the toilets were reported. Only three weeks into the 2007 school year, *The Courier Mail* reported that toilet breaks had emerged as a major issue, with toilets in some schools too far from Preparatory Year classrooms, especially when no teacher aide was available. As a result, classroom activities were 'frequently interrupted for an excursion to the toilet' (Livingstone, 2007a, p. 7). Without full-time aides, this problem became more complex because some teachers took the whole class to the toilet or devised systems that allowed children to access toilets alone. These media reports and blogs acknowledged that toileting provisions and practices were unsafe, affirming the experiences of the teacher aides in my study.

Concerns about toilet provisions in state schools were also raised by the Public Works Committee in their report entitled *Prep School Year Capital Works Program* (Queensland Parliament, 2008). This report documented that the criteria to place toilets at a reasonable distance (100 metres) or in line of sight of Preparatory classrooms were

not followed in all schools. Some schools toilets did not meet either of these criteria. Broad concerns about the levels of risk posed to young children when accessing these distant toilets were noted. The *Prep School Year Capital Works Program* (Queensland Parliament, 2008) report reiterated the Early Childhood Australia (2008) recommendation that toilets be situated a maximum of 30 metres away from classrooms and with visibility to and from the classroom. This committee advised that new Preparatory facilities should have near toilet provisions within line of teachers' sight. Where this was not already provisioned, new toilet facilities should be provided. Of concern here is that, although existing toilet provisions in some schools were noted as posing an increased risk to young children's safety, no retrospective action was recommended.

In 2010, *The Courier Mail* published an article featuring Professor Briggs, an adviser to the National Safe Schools Framework. Professor Briggs commented that Preparatory children were 'at risk of violent abuse by older children in school toilets' (Hansen, 2010, p. 39). She was reported to state that 'two Prep boys allegedly accosted others going to the toilet ... Victims were forced to remove their pants and the boys urinated on them' (Hansen, 2010, p. 39). In the same year, the National Safe Schools Framework (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 2011) was endorsed by all Australian states and territories, and officially launched in March 2011. This national framework provides guiding principles 'to help school communities be proactive in developing effective student safety and wellbeing policies' (DEEWR, 2012, para. 3). The vision of this framework states: 'All Australian schools are safe, supportive and respectful teaching and learning communities that promote student wellbeing' (MCEECDYA, 2011, p. 1). The inadequacy of toilet provisions and the poor supervision procedures put in place by the schools do not support children's or aides' safety. They appear to be in conflict with the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld); the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008); the *Commission for Children and Young People Guardian Act 2000* (Qld); the National Safe Schools Framework (MCEECDYA, 2011) and the *Student Protection Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2011). Additionally, the rights and best interests of the child, identified as fundamental principles in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) are compromised. Of particular concern, these conditions did not improve throughout the five-year duration of my research. As a

result, the teacher aides continued to face risks to their personal and professional safety daily.

### ***Risk of professional security***

The professional security of the aides was jeopardised by the practice of being left alone with children in the toilets. The *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008) specifies that:

Employees should avoid, as far as possible, situations where they are alone with a student. In the conduct of their professional duties, some employees may be required to work in a one to one situation with a student. In such situations employees must follow the school's policy and procedure. When responsible for a single student, an employee should:

- have previously discussed arrangements with the principal;
- maintain visibility into a room;
- where possible, interact with the student in an area open to observation. (CEAoB, 2008, p. 10).

Some aides in this study believed that being alone with children was simply part of the role. Although they were concerned about risks inherent in this practice, they did not feel they could take action to discuss this further with other staff members or the principal of their school. As a result, they did not comply with the policy, which expects employees 'to take all reasonable steps to protect students from risk of harm [including] making formal notifications/reports to government agencies as well as referring matters of concern to relevant personnel within Brisbane Catholic Education' (CEAoB, 2008, pp. 15–16).

However, Dianne, was very concerned about the risks to children's and her own safety, as well as her job security, and enacted the requirements of the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008). Worryingly, when Dianne raised these concerns with her principal, he took no further action. Frustrated with this result, Dianne discussed her concerns about toileting procedures during a workshop facilitated by the Brisbane Catholic Education Office. She was advised later not to take further action. Dianne explained: *the response back has been don't go there ... don't ask* (D, 1p39). The inaction of the principal and the advice of the guidance officer appear to be in conflict with the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008) and the *Occupational Health and Safety Policy* (CEAoB, 2006), which

expects employees to take ‘shared responsibility for their own health, safety and wellbeing and that of others who may be affected by actions’ (CEAoB, 2006, p. 4). Additionally, obligations within the duty of care identified in the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008, p. 15) were not upheld. Under the duty of care (CEAoB, 2008, p. 15), Brisbane Catholic Education responsibilities include ‘providing and maintaining a safe and healthy work environment; ensuring safe systems of work; and providing information, instruction, training and supervision to ensure health and safety’. The practices of children accessing toilets alone and teacher aides supervising and supporting children in toilet blocks on their own can be seen to be unsafe systems of work. These organisational procedures are in stark contrast to the elimination or minimisation of risk stipulated in the *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008). Worryingly, the teacher aides’ stories and experiences reveal that, although all employees are expected to comply with the duty of care responsibilities, this is not always evidenced in school practice.

## **School Politics**

The *Student Protection Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2011) asserts a viewpoint of protection and proactive behaviour by the school community, rather than just compliance with regulations. This policy acknowledges the significance of building a school culture that embeds student protection and wellbeing. Yet the silence and passivity of Dianne’s principal contradicts the pro-active stance of this policy. This behaviour appears to demonstrate a disregard for ‘ongoing development, monitoring and review of School culture and ethos that promotes and encourages the reporting of potential harm and abuse’ (Catholic Education Council, 2011, p.3). As revealed in earlier chapters, the principal’s actions affected the aides’ responses and persistence in taking action to improve children’s safety and their own sense of safety and security.

Bec and Jacqui had mixed experiences in sharing concerns with their principal. They worked at the same school, and both suggested that it was difficult to raise issues because the principal did not engage with them or visit the classrooms. However, Bec shared an instance in which she identified a workplace health and safety concern. The Preparatory Year aides at Bec’s school were expected to supervise children on their own during meal breaks. This entailed *watching the toilets, doing first aid and minding*

*the kids who were still eating* (B, 23p12). She explained: *I went up to the boss and said ... 'I think that's a bit much because you know you can't be supervising everything'* (B, 23p12). Bec's concern about this issue resulted in her speaking out. This proactive stance is consistent with the *Student Protection Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2011). As a result, the principal removed the teacher aides from duty, complying with the *Occupational Health and Safety Policy* (CEAoB, 2006) clause: 'We will coordinate and evaluate appropriate strategies to manage physical, psychological and social aspects of health and safety' (pp. 3–4), and the duty of care clause (CEAoB, 2008). However, taking this position meant that, while the principal took action to reduce the risk of harm to his employees, he also had to manage the supervision of children through rostering on other teaching staff. This left Bec feeling uneasy about the ramifications for the teachers: *I didn't mean to take the duty away. I didn't mind doing first aid* (B, 23p12). However, Bec was very pleased with the result for herself. She justified this action as the principal's decision: *He took them all away, so I thought, well, thank you very much!* (B, 23p12). Bec enjoyed a successful outcome from her discussions regarding playground duty, but other pressing issues such as toileting protocols went unreported. Although the aides may have felt that they would not get a successful outcome from raising this issue, in Bec and Jacqui's case, they also missed an opportunity of having the strength of two like-minded people to assert action.

Being involved in school politics is an expectation of employment. The *Code of Conduct* (CEAoB, 2008) sets out an expectation that employees 'maintain a current understanding of the law, professional ethics, delegations, policies and procedures and other codes of practice to a standard that enables them to competently perform their work duties' (CEAoB, 2008, p.19). However, the context of Catholic Education policies is complex and problematic, even threatening the job security of teacher aides.

### **Policy development and implementation**

Queensland is divided into five Catholic Education dioceses: Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton and Toowoomba. The QCEC holds key responsibility for state-wide policy development in the areas of funding, advocacy, research, industrial and public relations. The QCEC contributes to policymaking in areas of education and curriculum, for which the Catholic Education Council is the responsible body for policy development and implementation. The Catholic Education Council's role is 'to discern,

tender advice and recommend broad educational policies and strategic priorities to the Archbishop, and monitor policy implementation' (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2010a, para. 6). Policy is described as 'an authoritative determination of principles and/or directions for action to be applied throughout the Archdiocese in accordance with the Council's mandate' (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2010b, para. 1). It is evident that the Catholic Education Council adopts the role of knowing and asserting the 'correct' view. This stance is in keeping with a positivist viewpoint of policy (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1990, 1994; Codd, 1988; Farrell, 2001; Nichols & Jurvansuu, 2008; Taylor et al., 1997). The directive of policy is passed onto schools, and a clear mandate is held by the Catholic Education Council in terms of monitoring policy implementation. Yet the Catholic Education Council does not control practicalities such as time frames, personnel involvement, protocol or review. 'Policy states what is to be done, but not how, when or by whom' (Catholic Education Council, 2010, para. 1). The Catholic Education Council (2010, para. 1) states that 'those affected by the policies have a right to be involved in their development. Policies are developed collaboratively with all stakeholders'. Although leaving the practicalities of policy implementation to schools may foster more ownership and contextual responses to perceived issues, it cannot be assumed that all stakeholders are given opportunities to participate in policy discussions.

It seems that the onus is on the principal to facilitate discussions or communication to gather a range of insights and perceptions to inform policy implementation school by school. Importantly, relationships between the principal and staff and between staff members affect the nature of these discussions. Issues arise such as whose agendas are privileged or taken up, which staff members are seen as authoritative or knowledgeable about the policy agenda and whose voices are heard or excluded. Teacher aides without a strong working relationship with the principal or classroom teachers could find it very difficult to feel that they would be listened to and may be hesitant to try to engage with discussions, as exemplified in the experiences of Dianne, Jacqui and Bec. Additionally, as the aides' experiences in my study show, concern about job security means that many teacher aides are reluctant to disagree with or raise issues with the principal, even if they are on good terms. This difficulty is illustrated by Bec's comment: *if you wanted some better benefits or if you wanted to talk about things you always have in the back of your mind, 'Ooh I don't want to cause any waves cause I may not have a job'* (B, 3p8).

The principal's knowledge of early childhood principles and philosophy is another critical factor to consider. As revealed in earlier chapters, without this understanding, principals may narrow or limit possible actions or resources, or implement practices or protocols that challenge sound early childhood pedagogy. When Jacqui and Dianne were removed from their classroom to work elsewhere in the school, the children and classroom teachers were disadvantaged by the disruption to their routines and relationships. Additionally, Jacqui's and Dianne's sense of belonging, participation and professional identity were compromised. Yet, the principal could be seen to be following policy because the Preparatory classes still had teacher aide hours assigned to them.

It is likely that most policy discussions at the school level would occur during staff meetings or pupil-free days when staff teams could meet without affecting teaching responsibilities. Again, this was problematic for some of the aides. Jacqui and Bec explained that, during pupil-free days, the staff met together initially for prayer and a general discussion. However, after this, the aides and teachers separated. *We come down and do our work and then they go and do teacher stuff* (J, 14p9). Although the aides were included at the beginning of the day, they were not involved in further discussions deemed to be *teacher stuff* (J, 14p9). This marginalised them from information and discussion. Further, most teacher aides in my study identified that they did not attend staff meetings:

Bec: *It's just a given you know that you don't go.*

Dianne: *You have to volunteer your time to go to staff meetings. Teachers have to go and if we want to go we have to volunteer our time to go.* (D, 24p5)

The aides indicated that they did not attend staff meetings for a variety of reasons. These included:

- They were not paid for their attendance.
- Some already felt they were working additional hours without pay.
- Some sensed they were overstepping their role or responsibilities.
- Some suggested they did not belong in these meetings and felt a sense of intrusion or hostility.

When I talked with Bec and Jacqui about their relationship with the school staff, they commented:

Bec: *I feel we're part of it and not part of it either.*

Jacqui: *Mainly to do with our responsibilities really.* (J, 17p2)

I asked Bec to select a photograph to represent this relationship. She selected the image of the uncoiling rope (see Figure 27) and explained: *I think that one [talking about this photo]. We're all in here and maybe sometimes we're over here* (B, 17p2). This conversation was telling. Jacqui and Bec revealed a sense of isolation or marginalisation from the rest of the school. Jacqui acknowledged that she felt welcomed by the staff, yet was also aware that responsibilities set them apart. While they felt part of the whole team and included in some aspects, I wondered whether their sense of being apart from the team was exacerbated by the fact that the aides did not attend staff meetings. Although they were not expected to attend, their absence from meetings could have reinforced other staff perceptions that the Preparatory Year aides were not interested in participating in school discussions or decisions.



**Figure 27: Librarianguish (2006). Rope.**

The dilemma of silence and agency is also noteworthy here. While the aides may have been reluctant to participate in staff meetings or discussions, or take up issues with the principal, they could not lay the blame for exclusion from policy discussions entirely on others. Jacqui commented that she felt that she and Bec chose their battles or concerns deliberately: *I just don't think we get involved in the politics of everything* (J, 15p13). By not taking such actions as attending meetings, speaking out or sharing dilemmas, the aides may have been responsible for negating their right to be involved, thus contributing to their marginalised position in practice and policy. Similarly, some of the aides were very unsure about what policies were in place at their school. Previously, I shared the dilemma of some aides not having information about their job conditions and hours, and not knowing how to find out. Again, rather than remaining silent or uninformed, the aides needed to accept some responsibility to investigate policy for themselves, rather than assume that others would do this for them or complain that they were not aware of conditions.

Additionally, some aides were expected to contribute to administrative policy. Bec and Jacqui explained that they were surprised that they had to write their own job descriptions:

Bec: *We wrote our own job descriptions! Did you have to write your own job descriptions?*

Sally: *No.*

Bec: *We had to write our own job descriptions!* (B, 3p8)

Dianne explained that aides at her school did not have *specific job descriptions*. *A Prep aide is just a Level 2 aide* (D, 3 p8). While the request to write their own descriptions surprised these aides, it also provided an opportunity for them to investigate policy and conditions. However, Bec replied: *I don't have a job description for Prep. Just my description for an aide at the school* (B, 3p8). Rather than writing a specific job description, the aides relied on the general descriptor of aides' duties throughout the school. Bec would not comment on why they had chosen to use the general description. Perhaps Bec and Jacqui did not feel that their work would be appreciated. Cutcher (2009) reminds us that responses to change are affected by lived experiences within and outside of the organisation. The aides' passivity may be linked with their sense of marginal participation in the workplace. If the aides felt that nothing they did could change conditions, this may have resulted in them being resigned to a sense of failure or marginalisation. This pessimistic outlook is similar to the description of a resigned background to change (Ford, Ford & McNamara, 2002) raised in Chapter Two. Had Bec and Jacqui presented their own job description to the principal, and had it rejected, this would have further reinforced this sense of powerlessness and pessimism. However, not participating resulted in a lost opportunity to inform others about the specific role identity and value of preparatory aides, which could have led to improved role recognition. Again, this inaction helped to maintain their silence in the political space of the school and uphold the perception of aides as having low socio-political status and reluctant or unable to advocate for themselves.

### **Political action**

Although Jacqui and Bec chose not to engage with *the politics of everything* (J, 15p.3), other teacher aides in Queensland did. Many engaged with blogs imploring the government to increase aide time and improve resource provision. Commentary from aides detailed their concerns for children's safety and wellbeing. Issues centred on the lack of toilet provisions in or close to classrooms, and the difficulty for teachers trying to support children when they were sick or had toileting accidents without aide support. Many aides expressed concerns about feeling guilty when leaving the classroom, knowing that the teacher was left alone to juggle teaching, cleaning, toileting and supervision. Some aides had worked previously in preschools, and found the transition

to their role in Preparatory classes overwhelmingly stressful, with reports of some teacher aides resigning shortly after the introduction of the Preparatory Year.

The public comments and experiences from these teacher aides echoed the stories from my participants. Preparatory teacher aides and teachers alike across the state spent hours petitioning politicians and advocating for more teacher aide hours and resource support such as facility provision to improve the quality of young children's first year of school. Political action regarding quality discourses was timely. The issue of quality in early childhood education was on the national political agenda during this study (Elliott, 2006; MCEEDYA, 2008).

To recap from earlier in the study, the variation between the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* (Cth) and *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth), and the resource provisions (human and built) for the Queensland Preparatory Year in schools was confusing. Dianne was very perplexed by these inconsistencies. She commented: *the after-school care health and safety is so much more stringent than school. Some kids can come and they can play on that playground at school but then after school they can't play on it* (D, 22p4). Similarly, these same services operating in schools must follow regulations in accordance with toileting, hygiene, facilities and, significantly for teacher aides, child-educator ratios. So, although teacher aides do not need to be employed in Preparatory classes for the duration of the school day, the same children attending before- and/or after-school care in the same school setting are viewed as requiring and benefiting from additional adult support. Yet, media reports (Chilcott, 2013a; Livingstone, 2006a) and the aides' stories demonstrated that Queensland Preparatory classes often contain 28, and can contain up to 32, children with one teacher for part of or a full day. Preparatory class sizes of between 25 and 28 children are recommended in Section 7.10.2 of the *Catholic Employing Authorities Single Enterprise Collective Agreement—Diocesan Schools of Queensland 2010*. Yet, these classes are not supported by full-time teacher aide support. Significant implications arise. Four- and five-year-old children attending Preparatory classes in Queensland schools are denied access to key quality areas identified in the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011). These include specific provisions of facilities, educator ratios and curriculum guidelines. The ramifications of this for the aides in my study were unrealistic and unsafe work expectations such as supervising

children alone in toilet blocks, manual handling issues and lack of hours, which affected job security. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the aides' professional and pedagogical competence and profile may also have been compromised. I turn now to considering Preparatory curriculum and pedagogy more closely.

### **Preparatory curriculum and pedagogy**

The Brisbane Catholic Education website (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2010) boasts the provision of an 'exciting, fun, inquiry and play-based curriculum' for Preparatory children. The *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) is referred to as informing the Preparatory program, alongside the individual schools' learning policies and the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). The *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) was written before the introduction of the Preparatory Year, and refers to the early years of school as the years from preschool to Year 3. This policy endorses play as a valid and vital means of children's learning. Active learning is promoted as fundamental, and central to curriculum decision making in the early years. To enact the *Early Years Policy*, 'each school is expected to provide flexible, supportive and encouraging learning environments and ... provide appropriate staffing ratios to enable all children in the early years to experience success' (Catholic Education Council, 2001, p. 3). Prioritising successful literacy and numeracy teaching, and purposeful play and active participation, the *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) acknowledges the sociocultural influences on learning and advocates a learner-centred, responsive curriculum. The view of curriculum advocated by the *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) correlates with the perspectives that shape the curriculum developed for the Preparatory Year—the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006).

Along with the *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) and the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006), the Brisbane Catholic Education Curriculum publication, *Curriculum Matters*, supports the view that the provision of curriculum in the Preparatory Year and other early year classes should be responsive to children's inquiry and position children as unique and engaged. In 2006, an entire edition entitled *Early Years Education* (Ralston, 2006) presented vignettes, commentary and research by a group of teachers undertaking postgraduate

studies in early childhood at the Australian Catholic University, Brisbane. Hanifin's (2007) article in the same publication the following year reiterated the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) pedagogical viewpoint of the competent, engaged child. Timely in its release in the first months of the Preparatory Year rollout, Hanifin implores teachers to connect with young learners through playful, meaningful, negotiated and co-constructed learning. She reminds educators that 'learning is optimised as children experience knowledge and live the curriculum through engaged activity. This might be busy, play-based, messy, quiet and reflective, solitary or with others' (Hanifin, 2007, p. 4).

Yet the aides' descriptions of curricula, environments, teacher aide hours and children's involvement in the classrooms show great variance from the *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001). Only one school in my study allocated full-time teacher aides to Preparatory classes. At the beginning of my study, several aides described their Preparatory program as play based and active. However, Dianne's experiences differed dramatically. Working across two or three Preparatory classes throughout this study, she explained that the curriculum was teacher directed and controlled. The children were all expected to complete set tasks each day, with no variance between tasks. As the aide, Dianne was not involved in decision making about the curriculum or types of activities offered. Her input was restricted to offering suggestions for the types of material required for activities, such as paint or paper choice.

The view of children as receivers of knowledge and the teacher or adult as transmitter was quite common. In most classes, children were viewed through a deficit lens, of having to get ready to be fit for later school. In many instances, play was considered a treat, or means to let off steam or fill in time between 'school' activities. Great emphasis was placed upon children completing the important work set by the teacher. This gaze is not limited to my study. Early childhood centres have been strongly influenced by the concept of childhood as a time of preparation. Research and writing in early childhood education has presented the view that the adult's task is to plan suitable activities for children that will ensure children develop appropriate skills and knowledge (à Beckett, 2007). This deficit view of childhood is at odds with the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006), the *Early Years*

*Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) and the literature presented by the Brisbane Catholic Education Curriculum Team.

Over time, opportunities for play decreased as teachers focused on more direct, explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy. Yet the same *Early Years Policy* (Catholic Education Council, 2001) was in place throughout the five years of data collection. The *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) was also in use throughout the length of this study. So, what had brought on this change? The aides identified that the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2011) was fundamental to the changes they saw in both pedagogical practices and prescribed curriculum content, in particular, numeracy and literacy teaching. Their views reflected media reports at the time (Chilcott, 2010b, 2010c, 2011d, 2013b, 2013c; Chilcott & Chalmers, 2010; Elvish, 2013). A recent study by Petriwskyj et al. (2013) raises a discussion about the shift in focus between the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) and the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2011). The authors note that discontinuity emerged in Queensland as the curriculum focus for Preparatory classes became more academically based, as discussed earlier. Although the National curriculum was not mandated compulsory for use in Queensland schools until 2012, all the schools in this study were implementing draft forms of this curriculum from 2010.

The teacher aides in my research complained that they did not know much about the curriculum. They had little understanding about the content and were concerned about the rushed and formalised nature of the curriculum. This lack of knowledge was prevalent throughout this study. Early discussions indicated that some aides did not understand the value of play and inquiry-based learning for Preparatory children. Others felt unsupported pedagogically in their role.

***Professional development***

The *Early Years Policy* expects each Catholic School to ‘familiarise all staff with the *Early Years Policy* and negotiate relevant professional development’ (Catholic Education Council, 2001, p.3). Again, the lived experiences of the aides in my study are at odds with this statement. Most aides knew little about curriculum or pedagogy, and few had access to professional development.

Other problems marginalised the aides from curriculum knowledge and discussions. Reduced work hours meant that the aides had little time to talk with their teacher or attend staff meetings. Relationships with teachers, staff and principals also affected their involvement. However, the aides’ inaction is also noteworthy here. Although the aides may not have had access to professional development opportunities through the school, there is a substantial body of learning support materials available publicly at no cost. The *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006), drafts and revisions of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2011) and supporting materials are freely available online. *Curriculum Matters*, the periodic journal produced by the Brisbane Catholic Education Curriculum Team is also available for no charge online. Additionally, there is a raft of information about early childhood education and care philosophy and practice online including the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011) and the *National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program* (Early Childhood Australia, 2013). Taking an interest in what is happening in the field, undertaking ongoing inquiry, learning and reflection are critical tenets of professional practice identified in the early childhood *Code of Ethics* (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). Without adopting a proactive stance towards their own professional development, the aides may have projected an image of disinterest. However, without time allocated during work hours, accessing, reading and viewing these materials demand the aides’ unpaid, underpaid time. Making time to research or reflect on aspects of their pedagogical role may offer a starting point in professional conversations with other staff members. Similarly, principals may be more inclined to support further learning opportunities if they recognise the aides’ commitment to a particular aspect of professional interest.

## Synthesis

A raft of political decisions and economic provisions informed the establishment of the Preparatory Year in Queensland schools. Policy development, both at the state government level and across the Catholic Education Office level, shaped the organisational and structural application of Preparatory resources, both human and built, into Queensland Catholic primary schools. The stories of the relationships between the Preparatory aides and each of these political, organisational and contextual decisions have shown a sense of detachment, displacement and unknowing in many instances, from the macro socio-political level through to the school level. Issues such as hours of work, workplace safety and job security along with the challenge of understanding a new curriculum all affected the aides' lived experiences at both the classroom and the school level. Drawing upon the lived experiences of the participants in this research, this chapter has explored the nature of some texts and policies affecting Preparatory Year classrooms.

This chapter details a worrying divide between policy and practice on several fronts. Although some policy directives and texts advocate a collaborative view, this did not occur often. Noteworthy is the revelation of what is considered safe in policy and what happens in practice. Many of the lived experiences of the Preparatory aides in my study reveal potentially unsafe practices, in particular, with regard to the supervision of and children's access to toilets.

Paradoxically, at the time of my study, crucial political action to improve the quality, outcomes and professionalisation of the early childhood educational field was taken. The introduction of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011), encompassing the *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth) and *Belonging Being Becoming: The Early Years Learning framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009), has shifted perceptions and expectations of the role of educators working with children aged from birth to five years. Although early childhood educators are expected to enact policy and plan, implement, assess and document children's learning to meet or exceed one quality standard, experiences of some teacher aides working with children aged four years six months to five years in Queensland Preparatory classes tell a different story.

The aides' experiences offer insights into their marginalisation from professional practices and decision making. However, it is important to note that some aides also contributed to this exclusion. Rather than seizing opportunities to gain recognition for their role and improve working and safety conditions, some aides relied on others to advocate for them. Many aides chose not to get involved in *political stuff*, a stance that does little to raise their professional profile or amend their role conditions.

## *Chapter Eight: Working Ends*

*There are still old knots that are unrecorded, and so long as there are new purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover.*

(Clifford Ashley, 1944, p. 592)

### **Introduction**

This research seeks to understand the key research question: *What does it mean to be a teacher aide in a Preparatory class?* Congruent with my epistemological and ontological beliefs and van Manen's (1984, 1990) methodology, this chapter does not seek to generate a correct answer. Rather, it continues my adoption of hermeneutic-phenomenological principles as I reflect upon my understandings generated through the stories, images and writing within, and draw on these to unveil opportunities still to be explored. Consistent with the idea of interpreting and understanding as bound together and evolving (Gadamer, 1975), I take a brief reflexive pause to look back at how I approached meaning making within this study. Drawing on van Manen's philosophy of action (1984, 1990), I then explore some implications for practice and future research.

### **Coiled Ropes: Researcher Reflections**

Throughout the duration of this research, my knowledge of knot terminology and nomenclature grew alongside my understandings of the teacher aides' lived experiences. However, the beginning was a different story. I began this inquiry with questions and assumptions. My interest in the introduction of a Preparatory Year in Queensland motivated this study. However, the more I researched and reflected, the greater the gap in my understandings appeared to be. The story of the aides became more and more difficult to trace. So I had cause to stop and think. I realised I was trying to find the aides' voices and experiences from my own questions and assumptions. As if winding a coiled rope, I was trying to start at the core. Yet, teacher aides were not central. Teacher aides were outsiders, in literature, practice and policy. A new approach was necessary. I needed to wind this rope from the outside. Adopting this strategy enabled me to follow the aides'

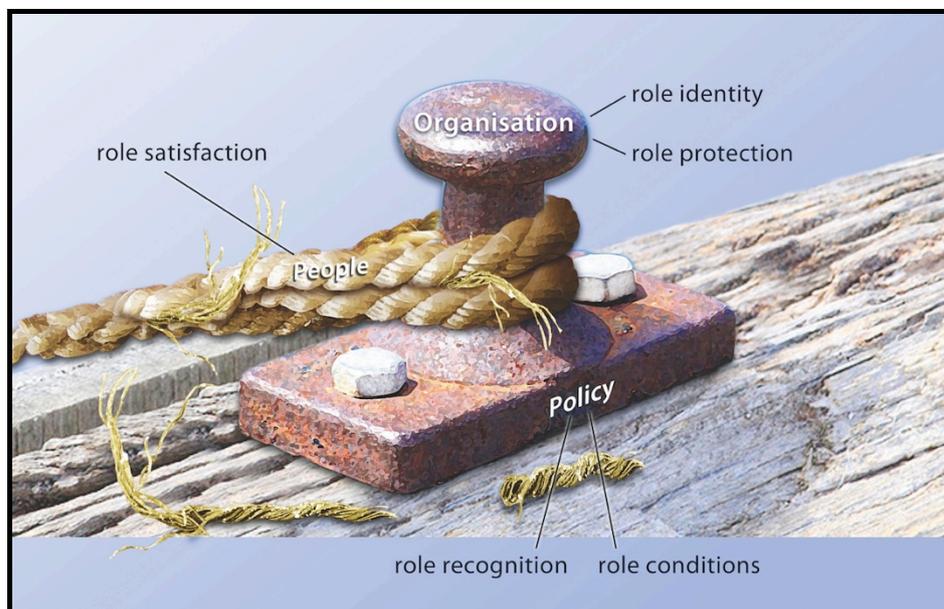
voices and reveal their stories. As I carefully gathered the rope in my hands, I moved closer to the centre. The aides' stories, central to this study, were brought to the core.

The use of phenomenology as a theoretical and methodological framework for this study is noteworthy. Phenomenology presents the researcher with a powerful opportunity to enhance the sharing of a multiplicity of local stories and local viewpoints purported by postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984). Rather than rely on the grand narratives passed to us by powerful others (Usher & Edwards, 1994), phenomenology allows space for life stories that challenge perceptions of universality and dominant discourses. This view is supported by Wilding and Whiteford's (2005) observation that, by focusing on participants' personal meanings, phenomenology can give voice to people who have been historically marginalised. Crucially, to share the stories of the aides, I needed to hear them, and retell them. The use of data-collection tools and methods such as synergetic focus group discussions (Lidstone, 1996), phenomenological data-generation methods such as utilising imaginal and descriptive experiences (van Manen, 1984, 1990, 2002a, 2002b), and individual discussions following close observation sessions promoted participants' voices. The development of specific metaphorical data-generation tools as conversation starters, such as the use of ropes as representations of experiences and feelings, contributed to these methods of garnering voices in research.

Van Manen (1990) reminds us that the use of anecdotes, metaphors and images enriches the text and deepens our engagement. Throughout this study, I have drawn on metaphor to help consolidate my thinking and to make the meanings of the aides' lived experiences clearer. Utilising this same tool, I now offer a conceptual model that presents a visual synthesis of the research. The use of metaphor and imagery within this model help to highlight the essence of what it means to be a teacher aide in a Preparatory classroom in Queensland Catholic schools. It is critical at this juncture to assert that this model is not finite. Nor will a quick glance at this image provide the answer to what it means to be a Preparatory Year teacher aide. Instead, this model may help to bring together some of the meanings and understandings revealed throughout this study, and provide a platform for further interpretation, recommendations and discussion.

## Research Model: Adrift from the Mooring

The following illustration depicts a mooring bollard (see Figure 28). This model draws on the metaphor of ropes to represent the nature of the lived experiences of the aides. In this section, I introduce the model components and then develop the ideas further.



**Figure 28: Conceptual Illustration: *Adrift from the mooring*. Adapted from *Mooring at the Jetty* (Brown, 2010).**

The picture depicts a mooring bollard attached to a fixing plate secured onto a pier. Ropes are attached to the mooring bollard; however, some smaller pieces of twine, ‘small stuff’, lie adrift from the rope and unsecured from the bollard. To recap from Chapter One, ‘small stuff’ is a nautical term for cordage less than 10mm in diameter.

The rectangular fixing plate represents policy. Bolted down, the rusted, metallic appearance of this plate suggests it has been fixed onto the pier for some time. It appears unmovable. A closer look reveals that the original bolts may have been replaced. While policies (the fixing plate) may appear fixed and rigid, surrounding political agendas and changes (the bolts) affect policies.

The mooring bollard symbolises the school as an organisation. Strong and steadfast, its position is framed by policy (the fixing plate). Composed of several geometric and organic shapes, the whole of this bollard represents the school as a living organisation.

The lower part of the organisation (the bollard) seems to flow out to meet the shape of policy (the fixing plate).

The ropes and small stuff represent people. The intertwined ropes attached to the bollard stand for school staff. Notably, frays are apparent in some of these ropes. Unravelling from the intertwined ropes are some of the teacher aides. Other aides (pieces of ‘small stuff’) are separate from these ropes, detached from both the organisation (the bollard) and policy (the fixing plate) and lying on the pier.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

As teacher aides go about their work in Preparatory classrooms, challenges arise. ‘Stuff’ happens. Gathering the ropes of the aides’ lived experiences together reveals the complexity of some of the knots and bonds inherent in the teaching, organisational and political stuff they face daily. As in the nautical model, a safe mooring relies on the secure fastening of a bollard to a deck or pier. So too, the aides’ sense of security and safety is reliant on policy recognition.

### **The fixing plate of policy**

The critical analysis of policy documents in Chapter Seven and the teacher aides’ lived experiences explored throughout this study reveal the silencing of Preparatory Year aides’ voices and role in policy. The participants’ collective experiences illuminated challenges within their role conditions resulting from the lack of political recognition of their role.

### ***Role recognition***

Without information about the role played by teacher aides in Preparatory classrooms evident in policy or on Government or Catholic Education websites it is challenging for teacher aides to explain or advocate for their position or the conditions under which they work. Similarly, the silencing of the aides’ role makes it difficult for others (teachers, principals and parents) to understand that role. Critically, this silence contributes to the professional and political marginalisation of the aides, and the ambiguity of the Preparatory Year teacher aides’ role, confirming past findings (Mansaray, 2006; Rutherford, 2012).

Despite their low socio-political status and marginalisation from policy, it is interesting to note the rhetoric around the perceived importance of teacher aides in Preparatory classrooms by successive Queensland Governments. Information on the Education Queensland website directly correlates the allocation of additional teacher aide hours with the provision of quality education for young children (DETE, 2013). DETE (2013) notes that as adult-child ratios are lowered, teachers are more able to give their students personalised attention, allowing children to ‘better progress their reading, writing and social skills at a formative time in their development’. This position is consistent with research, which demonstrates that lower child-adult ratios are a crucial index of quality (ACECQA, 2011; NCAC, 2006; NAEYC, 2005).

Lowering the ratios in Preparatory Year classes will improve young children’s opportunities to engage successfully with the academic, social and emotional challenges of beginning school. Furthermore, lower child-adult ratios may assist teachers to manage the increasing demands of Preparatory classrooms. Disturbing media reports in *The Courier Mail* (Chilcott, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b) about the number of children suspended or removed from Preparatory classrooms indicate that present ratios may not be effective.

The incumbent Queensland Liberal-National Party government has actioned increased funding to provide additional teacher aide hours for some Preparatory Year classrooms in Queensland state schools from 2013. Successive Governments have aimed to increase funding to afford more Preparatory Year aide hours to schools where needed. However, the base-line model of funded hours has not changed. When the Preparatory Year reform replaced the state preschool provision, the decision to cut teacher aides hours from 30 to 15 hours per week left young children in school environments with adult-child ratios of 1:25+ for more than half the week. Trial evaluation reports showed variances between aide hours allocations. This research has also shown that great variances occurred between the five schools in this study over 2007–2012. Most of the aides in this study worked for 20 hours per week in classes with over 25 children. Two aides in this study worked in classes with 28 children. In real terms, this left up to 28 children aged between four years six months to five years six months with one adult, the Preparatory Year teacher, for more than two hours per day.

State and Federal Government rhetoric around the importance of quality of education for young children must be transformed into fiscal commitment. While state political action

has been taken to increase Preparatory Year teacher aide hours to 25 hours per week in some schools, there is still a major shortfall of funding and commitment to support the provision of teacher aides in Preparatory classrooms in all schools, including Catholic schools, throughout the state. Further, the allocation of additional funding for teacher aides has been problematic, as often it has been used at the principal's discretion. Thus, the allocation of hours into Preparatory classes relies on the principal having a comprehensive understanding of the benefit and value of the Preparatory teacher aides' role.

The silencing of the aides' role in policy and the ambiguity of the role of teacher aides add complexity to this issue. Therefore, it is imperative that any funding measure for the provision of additional Preparatory teacher aide hours is well defined and specifically designated to the Preparatory Year classes. Not to do so could see a continuation of the distribution of these funds to other areas deemed important by the principal. This research calls for the allocation of more hours so that teacher aides can work in Preparatory classrooms across the full school day, to boost young children's successful transition into, and engagement with, school. If children are to become 'successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens' (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 8), as the Government purports, the provision of qualified teacher aides working for a full school day in Preparatory classrooms is essential.

The conservative Government (2012+) continues to tout the significance of quality early childhood education, and the impact of this upon children's 'health, learning and behaviour' (DETE, 2013). Despite burgeoning evidence supporting the benefit of highly qualified staff in early childhood settings (ACECQA, 2011; OECD, 2006), and the introduction of the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* (Cth) and *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth) requiring educators who work with young children to have qualifications equivalent to a Certificate III in Children's Services, teacher aides in Preparatory classrooms in Queensland Catholic and state schools do not require qualifications. This is despite children in Preparatory classrooms in Queensland schools being the same age as those captured in the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* (Cth) and *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth). Like some of the aides in this study, many teacher aides in Preparatory classes may have no qualifications on entry to their position, while others have Certificate III level

qualifications in other fields. The study demonstrates that level of Early Childhood Education training impacts on the aides.

This research highlights the challenge of aides' learning about curriculum or pedagogy while trying to undertake the role. While some of the literature suggests that teacher aides learn about their job on the job (Bourke, 2008; Lewis, 2005), this was not the case for all the aides in this study. Some aides worked with inexperienced teachers, others worked alongside teachers who were not early childhood trained. Many aides struggled to find time to discuss pedagogical issues. When they did find time, the teachers marginalised some from this process. It is noteworthy that some of the participants in this study that had completed a Certificate III in Children's Services before commencing the position believed that this professional knowledge made the role less ambiguous. Jacqui found that the teacher she worked with valued and, in fact, relied on her knowledge. Having this qualification assisted these aides to be viewed as pedagogically capable and useful by most of the teachers with which they worked. Some literature suggests teachers allocate tasks to aides according to their perception of the aides' capabilities (Warren, Cooper & Baturo, 2004), or their level of education or qualification (Sosinsky & Gilliam, 2011). Undertaking a Certificate III in Children's Services offers educators taking on the role of a Preparatory Year aide a broad engagement with professional knowledge specific to the field of early childhood theory and practice. Teacher aides without qualifications currently employed in the Preparatory classroom should be encouraged to undertake a Certificate III in Children's Services.

The lack of a requirement for qualifications by current policy statements also demotes the specialised professional knowledge and pedagogical understandings educators and teachers draw upon when working with young children. Given the injection of funding expenditure in 2013 at an estimated 54 million dollars to support young children in Queensland Preparatory classes, it would be reasonable to expect that the Government would want to ensure value for its fiscal commitment. In practical terms, to provide the best outcome for children, it could be argued that preference should be given to teacher aides holding specialised early childhood qualifications and experience to fulfil these roles.

*Recommendation One*

This research calls for the recognition of the specific nature of the teacher aide's role in a Preparatory class in policy. Underpinning this recognition is the expectation of the completion of a Certificate III level qualification in Children's Services or equivalent, alongside an increase in allocated aide hours to Preparatory classrooms to at least 25 hours per week.

Another key finding identified in the conceptual model is the impact of role conditions. Common to all of the participants' in this study were feelings of great insecurity about their role, including concerns about the allocation of hours, and issues of safety and security. The recommendation regarding role recognition addresses some of the aides' apprehensions about their lack of security in terms of work hours. I turn now to the implications of the aides' shared stories about their anxiety and disquiet with safety issues affecting themselves, the children and the teachers.

***Role conditions: safety and security***

Regardless of the hours of work allocated, the aides, like all employees, have a right to feel safe and protected from harm at their workplace (*Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Qld)). Two major concerns illuminated by the data were unsafe toileting provisions and manual handling procedures. Both matters, arising from building provisions and specifications, affected the aides' daily experiences in their workplace. While some procedural concerns about these matters are organisational in practice, the issues of safety and security in respect to building provisions stem from policy, or lack of it, as shown in the conceptual model.

The lack of safe and convenient access to toilets for Preparatory Year children is a grave concern. The aides' stories of their varied means of supporting young children's access to toilets shed light on the amount of classroom time toileting absorbed, and expounded serious concerns for the safety of children and aides alike. Issues raised by the aides included: bullying of young children in toilets; concerns about hygiene; teacher aides' access to and entry into toilets for the opposite sex; supervision of children when toileting or dressing; children leaving classrooms unsupervised; and teachers without aides leaving

classes of up to 28 children alone while they left the classroom to support children in toilets. This left the teacher aides in this study feeling exposed, vulnerable and at risk.

Once again, discrepancies between the *Education and Care Services National Law 2010* (Cth) and *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth) and current Queensland policy requirements for Preparatory classes in schools can be seen as divisionary and, in this instance, unsafe. While former state preschools and all current early childhood settings have to ensure children's safe and convenient access to toilets and hand washing facilities (*Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth)), toilet facilities for Preparatory Year children fall far short. The lack of dedicated toilet blocks for Preparatory children, visible from classrooms, compromises both the personal safety of children and adults, as well as the professional safety of aides and teachers.

As this study has shown, safety risks inherent in Preparatory Year children's access to toilets and supervision by an adult when using toilets can be seen as in conflict with key State and Federal Parliamentary Acts, including the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld), the *Commission for Children and Young People Guardian Act 2000* (Qld) and the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth). Furthermore, tensions exist between toilet provisions and practices and significant policies including the Code of Conduct (CEAoB, 2008), the National Safe Schools Framework (MCEECDYA, 2011) and the Student Protection Policy (Catholic Education Council, 2011). The interests of the child are paramount. Current provisions and practices can be seen to conflict with Article 3, best interests of the child, and Article 4, protection of rights, of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). Worryingly, there has been no change to these safety concerns since the introduction of the Preparatory Year in 2007. If these safety risks and tensions between policy and practice were found to actualise, serious legal ramifications for governing bodies would exist.

#### *Recommendation Two*

This research supports advocating for the provision of toilets for Preparatory classes no greater than 30 metres away from, and within sight of, Preparatory classrooms, as recommended by Early Childhood Australia (2008).

Another common thread through all the aides' experiences was the concern of unsafe work practices around the manual handling of equipment and preparation of resources. While teacher aides undergo workplace health and safety training, fulfilling some aspects of their role compromises their safety. The aides' experiences reveal that at times they undertook unsafe lifting and manual handling procedures when preparing, manoeuvring or cleaning up equipment or resources. The preparation and cleaning of classroom resources such as playdough, paint and glue are everyday tasks within early years' classrooms, including Preparatory Year classes. Yet the aides' stories reveal issues such as lack of hot water, and inappropriate height and placement of benches and sinks.

This research suggests the need for the development of a Preparatory Year workplace audit procedure to review and address problems such as bench and sink heights in accordance with national safety codes, to ensure that aides are not placing the health of their backs at risk. A review of building provisions is also advised to ensure that facilities in future Preparatory Year classrooms address these workplace health and safety concerns. Such a review may preclude any legal implications for the current Preparatory provisions. Additionally, an allocation of time for Preparatory Year teachers and aides to routinely undertake and complete this procedure would be beneficial.

#### *Recommendation Three*

This research suggests that a Preparatory Year workplace audit procedure be developed in accordance with national safety codes. Additionally, a review of building provisions for future Preparatory Year classrooms is advised.

In summary, this research calls for crucial policy change, action and reform at the political level. Importantly, this includes the recognition of the Preparatory aides' role, and amendments and improvements to their workplace safety conditions (toilets, facilities and manual handling issues). This would ensure that the fixing plate of policy provides a solid foundation for the mooring bollard of organisation. Notably, the analysis of the participants' lived experiences revealed that schools, as organisations, also enacted and produced policies and practices that directly affected the aides.

### **The bollard of organisation**

The site of teacher aides' practice is the school. Principals, as organisational leaders of the school, have a complex role, as they navigate and respond to a myriad of policies. At times, schools must change practice to meet policy expectations. Sometimes, more flexibility may occur and policies may be adapted. Schools also create their own policies to reflect the school culture or environment, and staff members within schools assume different roles within these policies. Many of the participants in this study reported being uncertain about their role, and pointed to silence about their role in organisational policy.

### ***Role identity***

The experiences of the teacher aides in this study demonstrated a variance in task expectations and job identity. A few of the participants identified themselves as teacher aides; others used the terminology of school officers, which encompasses teacher aides. Regardless of the terminology, the nature of the role of aides working in Preparatory Year classrooms is very different to that of those working in administration offices, or those supporting children with additional needs, or working with groups of children in primary or secondary classes. While being identified as school officers rather than teacher aides might offer a sense of the broad scope of duties and responsibilities undertaken in this role, the absence of role descriptors or position descriptions specific to the tasks required for their role while in Preparatory Year classrooms was problematic for some aides in this study.

Notably, in response to the *Catholic Employing Authorities Single Enterprise Collective Agreement—Diocesan Schools of Queensland 2012*, job descriptions are being developed for all school officers where these did not previously exist. The agreement states that these documents will be developed in consultation with employees. It is vital that Preparatory Year aides without specific role descriptions take this opportunity to work proactively and collaboratively with the school to develop these documents. The development of position descriptions specific to Preparatory Year aides will offer greater clarity about their duties and responsibilities. In turn, this will assist to raise the profile of the skilled work of aides in Preparatory classes and the pedagogical significance of this role for young children.

A problem identified by the participants in this study was the absence of job performance reviews. Without this process, the aides were concerned that they could not highlight safety or pedagogical concerns should they arise. They felt that the principal and other teachers had little knowledge of their role or classroom practice and thus presumed that everything was running smoothly and effectively. A specific job description may provide a tool to advance these discussions and assist a review process. Aides could be asked to review their tasks and consider how these are undertaken, informing classroom logistics and allocation of time to tasks. Additionally, these descriptors could provide a tool for reflective thinking around the professional development required to assist aides to undertake their role effectively.

#### *Recommendation Four*

Teacher aides should be engaged in a review process to inform and build shared understandings of their role and identify professional development requirements.

This increased awareness could contribute to the more consistent allocation of hours of teacher aides in Preparatory Year classes. This would benefit children, Preparatory Year teachers and parents, and potentially afford greater role protection and job security for teacher aides.

#### ***Role protection***

Working alongside a teacher, Preparatory Year aides undertake pedagogical duties across the cohort of the class, building a working relationship with each child. These practices and relationships affect the children's engagement with, and success in, learning. This study raises concerns of teacher aides being removed from their classrooms to assist with other classes or general school administrative responsibilities. The ambiguity around the role and value of the Preparatory Year teacher aide appears as a trigger for this practice. Many principals do not have a strong knowledge or understanding of early childhood practice and pedagogy. Principals may view aides in Preparatory Year classes as a source of readily available relief staff. Additionally, principals may feel they are rewarding these aides as they move them out of Preparatory classes to work in administration or with older, more 'capable' children. Aligned with the perception of maternal discourses, it

appears that some principals may consider that anyone can work as a Preparatory aide, and therefore utilise these capable staff elsewhere in the school to greater benefit. Jacqui identified with this view when she recalled her experiences in being moved from the Preparatory Year class to train others to work in the office, or assist in other classrooms. In recognition of the role they play in helping young children to engage successfully and safely in school life, the place of qualified teacher aides in Preparatory classrooms requires protection (see Recommendation One).

The lived experiences of the aides reveal variances in their sense of place within the school, and their engagement with school life. Consequently, variances could also be seen in the aides' sense of worth and job satisfaction. As depicted in the nautical model, some of the ropes representing school staff were frayed, representative of the aides' relationships with others in the school. While frayed, these ropes still show attachment to the bollard, representing the school as an organisation. Other aides, however, are detached from the rope in the image, and can be seen lying on the deck. These pieces of small stuff symbolise the aides' sense of marginalisation and silence.

### **People as ropes and stuff**

At times, the aides felt included and valued by others, yet stories of marginalisation were shared throughout this study. Disconnections occurred through: minimal time for professional discussions; the lack of recognition of the aides' skills or knowledge; limited opportunities for professional development; and the passivity of aides in sourcing information or participation at staff meetings. The aides' experiences illustrate that the nature of their relationships and interactions with colleagues, principals, parents and children have a great effect on their sense of identity and their perception of their place in the school.

### ***Role satisfaction***

This study shows that when the aides felt their teacher understood their role and valued their contribution to the Preparatory class, the aides' sense of role satisfaction was extremely positive. Most aides in this study experienced feelings of deep attachment to a class and teacher. Their stories illuminate the satisfaction of a working partnership. In many cases, aides in these relationships worked additional unpaid hours or undertook

extra duties to assist the children and teacher. In these instances, the aides evidently saw value in giving extra-unpaid time to strengthen these relationships.

Interestingly, the literature suggests that many teachers feel ill-prepared for working with an aide (Bourke, 2008; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Ratcliff et al., 2011; Souto-Manning et al., 2008; Stacey et al., 2013). More opportunities for teachers to develop their understandings of the role of the aide and how to enhance workplace relationships with the aide are called for. This is recommended as an area for further research later in this chapter. Such knowledge may assist teachers with building more inclusive relationships with their aides.

This research recognises that Preparatory Year teacher aides must work to enhance effective partnerships with teachers. It is vital to note that, at times, the aides in this study actually contributed to their sense of marginalisation. The aides' experiences reveal a lack of action or reticence around key aspects of their role. The participants' absence from meetings and lack of initiative to source information about the curriculum or role specifications is concerning. If their role is to be valued, and partnerships forged, teacher aides need to advocate strongly for their place in a professional team. Adopting a proactive stance is vital to the success of professional engagement and advocacy. To do this successfully, aides must take the initiative to research information about role conditions, curriculum expectations or other aspects of their role. Additionally, the aides' attendance at staff meetings is recommended. This study recognises the challenge these recommendations may have for teacher aides, as their sense of marginalisation is palpable, and their rate of pay extremely poor. Therefore, a time off in-lieu arrangement, which recognises the commitment of the underpaid, undervalued aide to extend working hours when attending meetings, or paid non-contact time, would be beneficial.

The lack of time for professional conversations was a mutual concern for all participants in this study. Without full-time aide allocation, teachers preferred that the aides use the limited time they had to undertake preparation or cleaning tasks or work with children. The participants' stories reveal that few professional discussions occurred around curriculum or pedagogical matters. The provision of paid non-contact time for such discussions, including meetings and research as noted above, would assist to address this issue. Such discussions would afford more opportunity for aides and teachers to share their knowledge and understandings (Bourke, 2008; Jones et al., 2012; Stacey et al., 2013;

Webster et al., 2011). Providing opportunities for teachers to share their professional higher order knowledge is a straightforward and effective way to increase teacher aides' skills (Jones et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2011). Thus, the inclusion of aides in work-time collaborative conversations and discussions would be effective professional development for teacher aides.

The aides' stories reveal their frustration when trying to understand or implement strategies or use resources without training. Most of the aides in this study were afforded limited professional development opportunities. This was a significant point of exclusion, as they felt that teachers were offered varied training opportunities. Recent research (Bourke, 2008; Jones et al., 2012) suggests that teacher aides benefit from collaborative professional development opportunities directly related to everyday practice. Preparatory Year teacher aides and teachers should be offered opportunities to attend workshops or seminars together. Mindful that such attendance can be financially constraining, this research also recommends teacher aides and teachers consider professional development opportunities available online. At present, there are a significant amount of online web posts, forums and information discussions supporting teachers and educators around topics such as curriculum development and implementation, early years' pedagogical practices and sustainable practices. Spending time together as teams to view and discuss issues arising from these presentations would be a practical and cost-effective method of building the collective knowledge and understandings of each team. Again, when requiring aides to give their time towards professional development, paid time, or time in-lieu, is warranted, rather than relying on the goodwill of the already underpaid aide (Stacey et al., 2013; Webster et al., 2011).

The involvement of teacher aides and teachers in collaborative discussion and networking groups resonates with the ideas of professional learning communities developed initially from Senge's (1990) writing on learning organisations, and Wenger's (1998, 2000) body of work around communities of practice. These works have much to offer for supporting professional learning, engagement and reflexivity. Notably, the role of the principal is critical to the successful formation and implementation of these groups. This research recognises the complexities of the principal's role in leading and building the capacity of staff teams. However, investing time, encouraging staff to engage in collaborative discussions, and affording discussions through structuring or re-structuring timetables,

roster duties and the like would be advantageous. The collaborative nature of group conversations may assist with dispelling the lack of recognition many aides feel in regards to their knowledge and experience. Importantly, these opportunities for aides and teachers to construct and reflect on their understandings collaboratively may assist to create and promote ‘respectful, reciprocal relationships needed for effective teamwork’ (Jones et al., 2012). In turn, this might enhance classroom practice, professional capacity, staff morale and role satisfaction.

*Recommendation Five:*

Preparatory teacher aides and classroom teachers should engage in joint professional development opportunities and discussions.

The research model shows ropes coming adrift from the mooring. The recommendations for action offered across the political, organisational and personnel strands above could assist with securer moorings for the ropes representing teacher aides. Importantly, the issues affecting teacher aides’ experiences have implications for future research as well. I turn to these now.

**Further research**

Significantly, this study of teacher aides’ lived experiences in Preparatory classrooms offers new insights to the limited body of research about teacher aides in general and the Queensland Preparatory Year. The exploration of the research question, *What does it mean to be a teacher aide in a Preparatory class?*, has revealed many topics warranting further investigation. Two, in particular, are poignant.

This research identified startling discrepancies in the provision of quality educational environments for young children. Particularly worrying are the concerns identified regarding the physical environments and safe work practices of the Preparatory classroom. Further research to address potential collisions between policy, facility provision and practice is warranted.

Secondly, further research to explore professional capacity building of all school personnel is suggested. The development of effective methods and strategies to support principals’ understandings of early childhood principles and pedagogical practices, for

these leaders to bolster the provision of high quality education for all school students, is required. Alongside this, the development of professional exchange and dialogue between teachers and teacher aides is necessary. Importantly, such research needs to capture all stakeholders, not just leaders' perceptions of other staff members. Additionally, engaging pre-service teacher education students with similar course material is necessary to alleviate the noted concern of new teachers in feeling ill prepared to work with teacher aides.

The nautical model shows the interconnectedness between policy, organisation and people, in particular the aides. Further research may strengthen the co-dependence of the bollard, fixing plate and ropes. Exploring ways to support the professional capacity of staff teams may shore-up more opportunities for professional engagement. In turn, this may lead to greater collaboration and participation. In respect to the model, a positive outcome of this may be less fraying of the ropes. Additionally, more research undertaken to shed light on potential conflicts between policy, provisions and practices, especially in regard to workplace health and safety concerns, may bolster the security and reduce the friction between the bollard (school as an organisation) and the fixing plate (policy). This, in turn, will help to reduce the amount of small stuff (aides) lying adrift from the mooring.

## **Synthesis**

Tilton (2008, p. 10) reminds us that 'the end of the rope or cord used to tie a knot is the *working end*'. The lived experiences of teacher aides working in Preparatory classes unveil complex knots and frays in the *working end* of their ropes. Issues of security, safety and silence mat their ropes. As a result, at times, the aides are reluctant to pick up the *working end* of the rope. Sometimes, others prevent the aides from knot work, and so they require advocacy on their behalf.

The generous gift of the participants' time and involvement in the *working end* of this research study enabled me to shine light upon a relatively unknown phenomenon: the lived experiences of teacher aides in Preparatory classes in Queensland Catholic Schools. As the teacher aides shared their joys and frustrations about their roles and their experiences with me and other participants, they learnt about each other's practice. Being involved in this study afforded them opportunities to build on their knowledge of early childhood principles and professional practices.

For too long the voices of teacher aides working with young children have been silenced. Importantly, this research contributes to an awareness of teacher aides' complex and pivotal roles, and aims to improve the working conditions and professional engagement of these disenfranchised workers. This study seeks to offer enough rope to bind teacher aides' stories to the literature today, and inform future research, policies and practices.