Queensland Preparatory Year teacher aides’ lived experiences: Some knots and frays

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of six female Preparatory Year teacher aides in Queensland Catholic schools. The research was undertaken over a period of five years, commencing from 2007. The non-compulsory, full-time, universally available Preparatory Year replaced part-time preschool classes in 2007. As a result, many teacher aides working in preschools moved into Preparatory classes. The enrolment age of children entering Preparatory classes was increased by six months from the previous preschool provision, and in response, resource allocations including teacher aide hours were re-structured. Teacher aides were highly valued in the old preschool system where they provided full-time responsive support to both teachers and children. Nevertheless, their hours were halved when the new Preparatory Year was introduced. While increases to teacher aide hours have been made since, these revised allocations still fall short of the previous preschool allocation.

This thesis asks the participants ‘what does it mean to be a teacher aide in a Preparatory class?’ The exploration of this question is noteworthy as there have been limited investigations of the Queensland Preparatory Year reform, or of the role of teacher aides working with young children. The literature reveals that teacher aide voices are marginalised, and thus this study aims to give voice to an under-represented group.

Drawing upon van Manen’s (1984) phenomenological approach, the thesis focuses on increasing understandings of the nature of everyday experiences for teacher aides. Significantly for this study, van Manen (1990, p. 154) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a ‘critical philosophy of action’, well suited to radically reforming educational practice and strengthening pedagogic thoughtfulness and competence. In keeping with this approach, and mindful of the aim to hear the voices of a marginalised group, data collection tools were selected to support the expression of lived experiences. The use of ropes and knots as a metaphor is employed as a conceptual thinking and writing tool, as well as a data-generation method to help reveal feelings and perceptions. Coupled with methods such as imaginal experiences, synergetic focus groups, and close observations, this study introduces innovative methods of facilitating and generating conversations and insights from participants.
The introduction of new quality legislation in Australia has shifted perceptions and expectations of early childhood educators. This research points to a worrying incongruity between the roles of teacher aides in Preparatory classes in Queensland, and those who work with children of the same age in other settings. The teacher aides’ experiences reveal challenges to their daily practice. In particular, the study shows an undervaluing of the role of teacher aides in Preparatory classes across three dimensions: political, organisational and human. Five central concerns arise across these dimensions: role recognition, role conditions including hours and safety, role identity, role protection and role satisfaction. These issues demonstrate the marginalisation of the aides from the early childhood profession. A conceptual illustrative model of these key issues is offered. Furthermore, recommendations for policy, practice and future research are drawn. Thus, recommendations for teacher aides include mandated early childhood qualifications, specific role descriptors and performance reviews, and increased hours committed specifically to Preparatory classes. This study also argues that attention needs to be given to building the professional capacity of staff teams.

In essence, the limitations of the current Preparatory Year are explicitly exposed. Often silenced in policy and practice, this study provides significant insights into the complex and pivotal roles teacher aides play in Preparatory classes every day.
Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.
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List of Abbreviations

AECA           Australia Early Childhood Association
CEAoB          Catholic Education Archdiocese of Brisbane
CEC            Catholic Education Council
COAG           Council of Australian Governments
ECA            Early Childhood Australia
ECTA           Early Childhood Teachers’ Association
OECD           Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P&C            Parent and citizen
QCEC           Queensland Catholic Education Commission
QSCC           Queensland School Curriculum Council
TAFE           Technical and Further Education
UNE            University of New England