

Producing and Maintaining Professional Identities in Early Childhood

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Overview

This study is an inquiry into early childhood teacher professional identities. In Australia, workforce reforms in early childhood include major shifts in qualification requirements that call for a university four-year degree-qualified teacher to be employed in child care. At the same time as these reforms there is a growing body of evidence (see for example Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood & Brownlee, 2011; Thorpe, Milllear, & Petriwskyj, 2012; Vajda, 2005) that suggests these same four-year degree-qualified early childhood teachers have an aversion to working in child care. This collision of agendas warrants investigation.

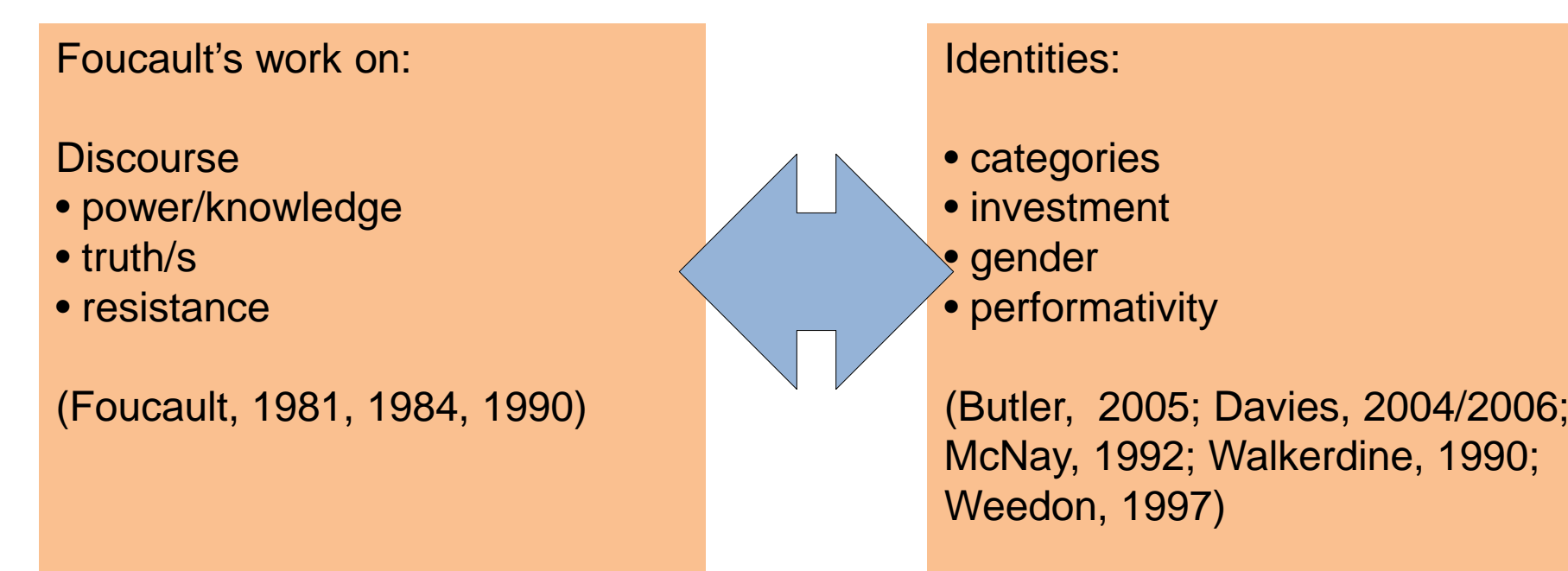
This study seeks to problematise the construction of early childhood teachers' professional identities, and in doing so raises new questions about teacher career choices. Consideration of the discursive formation of early childhood teachers' professional identities will go some way to understanding what is *sayable* and *unsayable* when it comes to ways of *being* and *performing* an early childhood teacher.

Research question

The key research question that informs this study is:

How are early childhood teachers' professional identities currently produced?

Theoretical framework



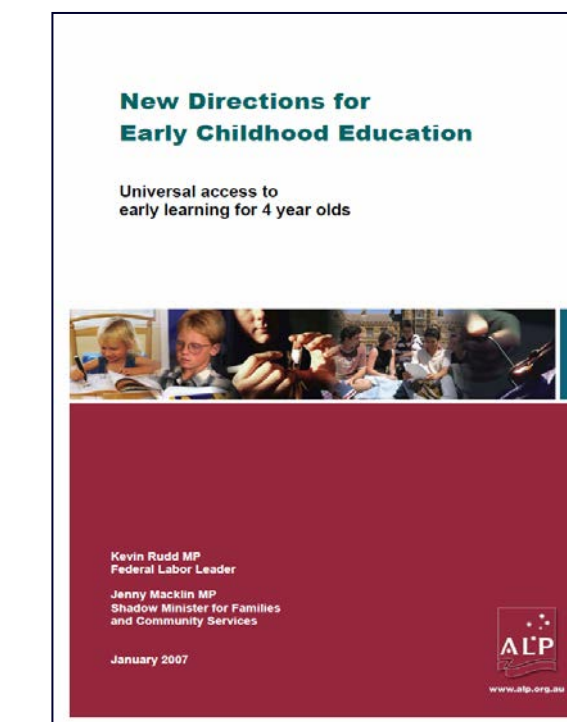
Methodology

The early childhood teacher in child care is problematised through a particular method of discourse analysis. There are two sets of data. The first is a key early childhood political document, *New Directions for Early Childhood Education: Universal access to early learning for 4 year olds* (Rudd & Macklin, 2007), read as a "moment of arising" (Foucault, 1984, p. 83). This political document was selected for its influence on the early childhood field, and in particular, workforce reforms that call for four-year degree-qualified teachers to work in before-school contexts, including child care. The second data set was generated through four focus group discussions conducted with preservice early childhood teachers. The document and transcripts of the focus groups were analysed as *text* (Foucault, 1981).

The treatment of both data sets involved redescription. For the policy document, a technique for reading *document-as-text* applied a genealogical approach (Foucault, 1984). For the focus groups, the process of redescription (Rorty, 1989) involved reading *talk-as-text*. The development and application of categories (Davies, 2004/2006) informed the data analysis. Irony provided a rhetorical and playful tool (Haraway, 1991; Rorty, 1989), to look to how seemingly opposing discourses are held together.

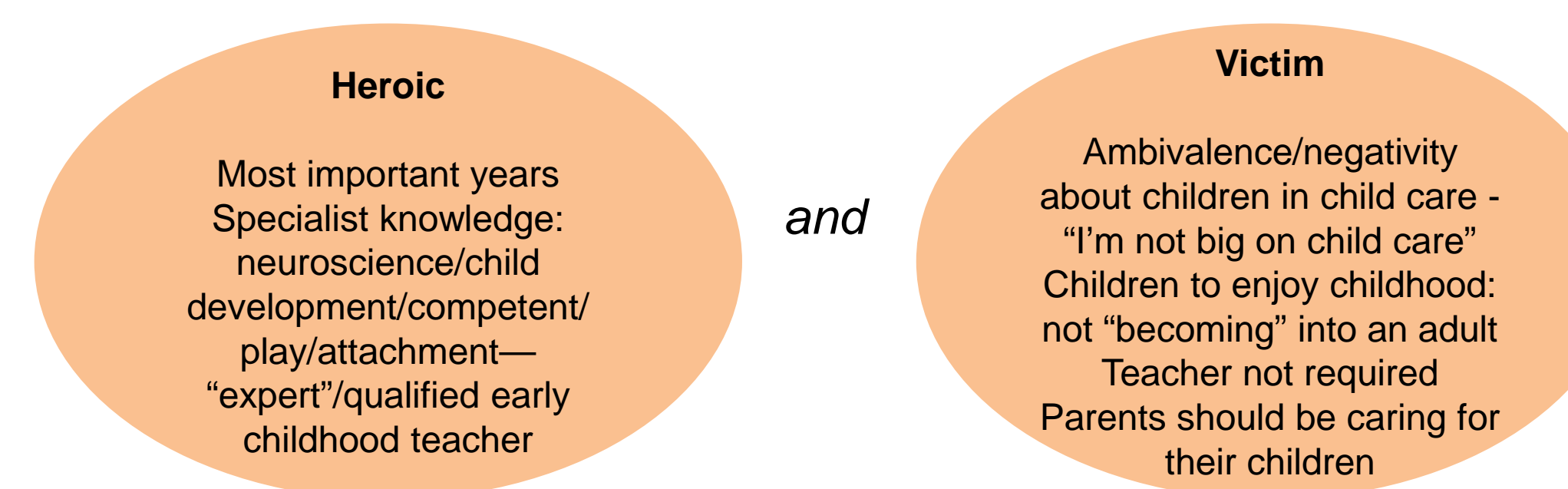
Document-as-text – New Directions policy document

The policy document *New Directions* claims that the "economic prosperity" of Australia relies on investment in early childhood. The arguments to invest are compelling and the neuroscience/brain research/child development together with economic/investment discourses demand that early childhood funding is increased. The intersection of these discourses produces professional identities of early childhood teachers as a necessary part of the country's economy, and thus, worthy of high status. The "child care sector" and work in child care settings are necessary, with children and the early childhood teacher playing key roles in the economy of the nation. Children are produced as "economic units", with a focus on what children are able to contribute to the future economy of the nation – thus producing children as "smart productive citizens". The early childhood teacher is produced through this image of a child and "the cost of loving" is emphasised. Through *New Directions* it becomes sayable that the work the early childhood teacher performs is legitimated and valued – for the economy of the nation.

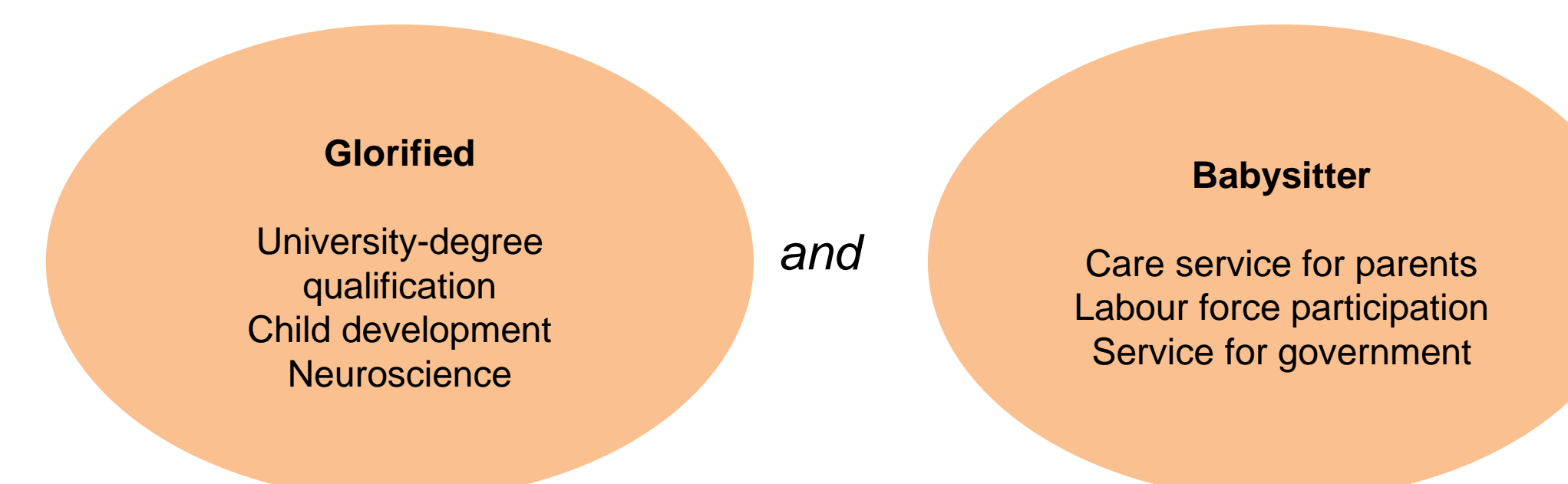


Talk-as-text – focus groups with preservice teachers

In the preservice teachers' talk of images of children, the discourses of neuroscience, child development and quality competed and collided to eventually produce child care as good. The early childhood teacher is important in saving children from what fates may await them if they do not participate in a quality child care program. The early childhood teacher professional identity is a hero. At the same time, the early childhood teacher in child care is a victim, frustrated by the lack of understanding - especially by parents - of the importance of the early years. The early childhood teacher is thus spoken as a "heroic victim".



Through the preservice teachers' talk of images of child care an ironic category was proposed. A "glorified babysitter" holds together discourses of child care as a care service/babysitting and the importance assigned through a university degree qualification. As a glorified babysitter, the early childhood teacher in child care is both powerful and powerless (Walkerdine, 1990). Power comes through the university degree. At the same time, the early childhood teacher is rendered powerless through the care discourses that diminish the value of work in the early years.



Conclusions and research implications

This study has gone some way to make visible some of the dominant and taken for granted discourses that historically constitute (Foucault, 1990, p. 9) early childhood teacher professional identities. New questions about professional identities in early childhood are raised, to prompt re-thinking of government policy, as well as aspects of early childhood teacher education course design.

The implications and significance of this study include:

- negativity about work in child care;
- policy intent and pre-service teachers talk mismatch; and
- qualifications in early childhood, with the four-year degree as the "gold star" standard.

Future research directions in this area are warranted, and valuable questions to ask, in the following three areas. include:

- **Policy**- What early childhood teacher professional identities are produced through contemporary policies?, What images of children are located in policies in early childhood? and What early childhood teacher professional identities are called for through these images of children?
- **Early childhood preservice teacher education** - What discourses are privileged and what discourses are silenced in early childhood preservice teacher education? and How are these discourses privileged or silenced in early childhood preservice teacher education?
- **Workforce** - How are the professional identities of early childhood teachers who choose to work in child care constituted? and What are the experiences of early childhood teachers in child care, and what conditions lead to attribution and retention?

The early childhood field is in a state of rapid change, and this inquiry has examined some of the disconnects between policy and practice. Awareness of the discourses that are in play in the field will continue to allow space for conversations that challenge dominant assumptions about child care, work in child care and ways of being an early childhood teacher in child care.

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