Phenomenographic elaboration: arts-based inquiry
as a complement to data collection and analysis.

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PHENOMENOGRAPHIC ELABORATION: ARTS-BASED INQUIRY AS A COMPLEMENT TO DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Phenomenograhy, as an approach to educational research, began appearing in publications early in the 1980s with the predominant form of data drawn from semi-structured interviews. As a qualitative approach, it is used to describe the variations in people's experiences through their own discourse and for analyzing meaning that people ascribe to their world. Critics of this approach have highlighted the need to pay closer attention to a deep examination of the phenomenon. This paper provides an overview of a doctoral study in progress, whereby a *methodological elaboration* has been developed in response to these points of critique.

Given that the study sits within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field, the authors postulate that by combining an arts-based inquiry technique with the traditional semi-structured interview technique, participants were more likely to feel at ease and therefore a greater depth of reflection on their own experiences would likely ensue. The production of the arts-based plate, as a representation of each participant's lived experience in relation to the impacts of regulation on ECEC teacher's pedagogy and practice, was used as a 'spark' to commence the semi-structured interview process and equally, provide an anchor for reference points for both participant and interviewer throughout that process. We argue that this methodological elaboration allowed a deeper examination of the phenomenon.

Introduction

Early childhood education and care has undergone significant change across Australia since the introduction of the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care National Partnership (NQA) in 2009. This paper is part of a doctoral study undertaken with twenty-five participants aiming to describe the conceptions of the experience of early childhood educators with the impact of regulation on their pedagogy and practices. Phenomenography is the qualitative approach used to reveal the variations in the participant's experiences; however criticism around the failure of the interview process to reveal deep understandings of the lived experience has been made against the approach. In the doctoral study a methodological elaboration has been devised to respond to this criticism. This paper aims to discuss the methodological elaborations of utilising arts based inquiry to enhance the traditional phenomenological data collection process of semi structured interviews by the examination of three samples.

Context

The provision of early childhood education and care within Australia has experienced significant change since the enactment at the national level of the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care National Partnership (NQA) (Tayler, 2011). This process has been overseen by the Productivity Agenda Working Group (2008) of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) through a National Partnership Agreement (Tayler, 2011). The consequence of this action is that Australia has, for the first time, national early childhood and education provision, and a new national body, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). This provision encompassed the implementation of a new regulatory system through new national legislation and

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regulation as of 1 January 2012. This reform implementation is scheduled to be conducted over an eight year period.

This changed regulatory environment has led to work reform, increased requirements for teacher qualifications, new quality standards, implementation of a curriculum framework and a commitment to universal access (DEEWR, 2010). Work reform is occurring as a result of the shift in the way early childhood development is viewed by policy makers. The ECE workforce is now expected to provide education services that enhance the development of the child as embodied in the document The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), provide educational leadership and undertake additional study to meet the qualification expectations of the legislation.

All services are required by legislation to obtain and maintain licensing approval to operate by satisfying the requirements of the National Quality Standards (NQS) (ACECQA, 2013a). The NQS involves services being measured against a rating system and this information is made available to the public. To meet the NQS services are also expected to engage with continuous ongoing improvement through the development of a Quality Improvement Plan (ACECQA. (2013b).)

While the implementation of the NQA is considered a significant milestone, the provision of early childhood services has undergone change in the past to varying degrees and the impact of change has had repercussions for early childhood educators. The purpose for this doctorial study is to explore the different understandings early childhood educators have of the regulatory environment.

Literature Review

Regulation in the literature has been expressed as different items including policy, curriculum, quality assurance, student attainment and staff qualifications. In this study regulation is taken as being broadly inclusive of all directives imposed upon educators by organisations deemed to be, and to represent, the government. A literature review revealed that research conducted around the impact of regulation (ie regulation implemented before 2012), on concepts such as job satisfaction (Fenech, Sumison, Robertson & Goodfellow, 2007), professional practices (Fenech et al, 2007 & Brown & Suimson 2007), day to day management practices (Rodd, 1999), remuneration (Sims, Hutchins & Dimovich, 2002), advocacy (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007), qualifications (Apple & McMullen, 2007) and agency (Osgood, 2006 & Duncan, 2004) was evident.

A variety of themes emerged across the literature in relation to how early childhood professional's reported experiencing the impact of regulation. Brown and Sumison (2007) reported early childhood professionals found the regulatory environment created "tension, mistrust, surveillance, sacrifice, resistance, compliance, relationships, interpretation and ambiguity, and the stifling of an educational focus" (p. 10). In other studies, early childhood educators experienced disempowerment under the burden of increased regulatory accountabilities leading to the researchers describing the professionals as "docile yet productive" (Grieshaber, 2000, p. 162) and noting educators engaged in technical practices with minimal opportunity for collegial discussion and/or reflective practice (Fenech et al, 2007). Professionals reported feelings of being "smothered", 'overtaken' and 'misplaced' (Dunn, 2004, p.18) as well as powerlessness that resulted in resignation and submission (Osgood, 2006). Fenech et al (2007) write that regulation is viewed as being constraining and dangerous, offering little enablement for children and educators, and that agency can only be exercised as resistance. Constraint was expressed in terms of "professional practice, autonomy and use of time" (Fenech et al 2007, p. 115), and when viewed in this way the early childhood professionals experienced the existence of a "regulatory gaze" (Osgood 2006, p16). Practitioners found this situation left little time for them to enact their own version of professionalism and as a result they were reduced to a technicist role (Osgood, 2006). As a result of corporatisation of early childhood services practices became aligned with procedures, efficiency and accountability (Woodrow, 2008).

Not all early childhood educators reported negativity towards the top down push approach of

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regulation. Early childhood educators reported making use of the regulations to enable and protect children and staff when required (Fenech et al 2007). Additionally, experienced, qualified educators employed in management positions revealed the ability to manoeuver within and around the regulatory environment making use of the content to advocate for and provide leadership of their immediate staff (Fenech et al, 2007). For the experienced educator, the regulations provided a framework for more formalised professional discussion around centre issues (Fenech et al, 2007) and the expectations of student attainment provided the opportunity for the examination of new ideas around conceptions of teaching and learning (Brown, 2009).

Research Design

This study sought to understand the phenomenon of the regulatory environment from the perspective of the early childhood educator. Qualitative research within the interpretivist paradigm was the approach taken. Researchers in this paradigm seek to understand a phenomenon rather than explain the phenomenon (Mack, 2010) and to "generate or inductively develop a theory of meanings" (Creswell, 2004, p. 9) throughout the research process rather than present a theory at the beginning of the study. Theory is considered to be emergent as the researcher presents the participants understandings of the world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Within a qualitative methodology and interpretivist paradigm, phenomenography has been selected as the empirical research method.

Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach within the interpretivist paradigm that aims at eliciting the variety of ways individuals experience a phenomenon (Bowden, 2000). By mapping the variety of ways individuals experience a phenomenon the researcher seeks to identify the understandings that a particular group of people have for a given phenomenon. The focus of phenomenographic research is not the individual or the phenomena, but the variation in the ways of experiencing something and this is presented as a collective meaning (Bowden, 2005). By revealing the different ways people think about a phenomenon conditions may be uncovered that "facilitate the transition from one way of thinking … to another" (Marton, 1986, p.33). The researcher seeks to elicit the lived experience of the participant in relation to a particular phenomenon.

In a phenomenographic study the phenomenon is not the object of the study, but rather the relation between the participants and the phenomenon (Bowden, 2005). A phenomenon is the central idea, event, happening or incident about which a set of actions are directed at managing, or to which the set of actions is related (Bowden, 2000). Individuals focus on different aspects of a phenomenon in different ways at different times and this is expressed as a "way of experiencing" a phenomenon. This way of experiencing a particular aspect of reality is expressed as a conception (Sandberg, 1997) and a conception is considered the unit of description in phenomenography (Irvine, 2006). Bowden (2000) stresses that conceptions must be reported as faithfully as possible bearing in mind that it is not possible for the researcher to be the participant and therefore can only report the communication.

Bowden (2000) discusses two approaches to phenomenography. The first is Marton's pure phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997), where the interviewer asks questions of anyone in general; people who may not have any connection with the phenomena under study. The second is developmental phenomenography, where people with direct connection and understanding of the phenomenon under study are interviewed (Bowden, 2000). This study is situated within developmental phenomenography because the participants in this study are to have direct experience of the phenomenon under study. This research approach provides the opportunity for the participants to express their ways of understanding the regulatory environment.

Because the aim of phenomenographic research is to express a collective meaning of a phenomenon, a second order perspective approach is taken. A second order perspective does not involve a psychological reduction of the data (Barnard, McCosker & Gerber, 1999) because the focus is on how participants experience a phenomenon instead of the cognitive process involved in understanding it

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(Yates, Partridge & Bruce, 2012). The phenomenon is investigated through the subject's experience not through the experience of the researcher (Pang, 2003). This perspective indicates a relationship between the subject and their world (Yates et al., 2012) because a second order perspective focuses on people's way of "experiencing various aspects of the world" (Marton, 1981 p. 171) or the way in which the phenomenon is conceived.

The predominant method for obtaining data when using a phenomenographic research approach is through the use of interviews. It is suggested that this data collection tool will most successfully enable the researcher to enter the life world of the interviewee (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). The interview is viewed as a conversational partnership in which the interviewer assists the participant with a process of reflection. The style of the phenomenographic interview is open ended and non-directive, except at the beginning of the process. The initial focus must be one that leads the interviewee onto the predetermined content of the particular context (Bowden, 2005). Francis (1993, p.7, as quoted by Walsh, 2000, p.19) states that "some predetermined leading experiences and leading prompts are required to focus the interview appropriately for the aims of the study in question". This initial focus requirement deems it necessary to view the interview session as semi-structured ie whilst maintaining an open ended, non-directive approach some structure is required initially in the interview session. Interviews are to be conducted at an allocated time and location of the participants choosing.

The result of phenomenographic research is a set of categories of description, which are "relative, experiential, context-orientated and qualitative" (Marton 1986, p. 33). The phenomenographic researcher seeks to generalize individuals' experiences from the data and form categories of description. The categories of descriptions are developed out of the aspects of the experience of many individuals (Bradbeer, Healey& Kneale, 2012). The final product of the research is referred to as the outcomes space. The outcome space of the research is represented by the set of empirically related categories of descriptions, which contain the variety of conceptions held by the subjects (Orgill, 2002). The outcomes space will not be presented in this paper.

The phenomenographic researcher traditionally uses interviews to collect data. The problems associated with collecting qualitative data through face-to-face interviews and the following impact of this interaction for research has been discussed across literature (Bahn & Barratt-Pugh, 2011). Participants can be reluctant to share their perceptions and understanding. Even though the style of the phenomenographic interview is open ended and non-directive attention is required at the beginning of the process to ground the interview. The initial focus must be one that leads the interviewee onto the predetermined content of the particular context (Bowden, 1994). Some phenomena is better represented by the arts particularly where the conceptions, (and not an analysis), of the lived experience is sought. With this in mind a methodological elaboration was devised and the interview process in this study was conducted in two stages so as to include a "leading prompt" (Walsh, 2000). The leading prompt was enacted by utilising the arts based inquiry process.

Arts based Inquiry

Arts based inquiry has been increasingly utilised as an approach by researchers to capture data (Sullivan, 2005). This recognition of the arts as an approach to research acknowledges art as an exercise in knowledge construction (Marshall, 2007) as meaning is constructed in the form of visual images. It is recognised that visual imagery in its many different formats may reveal knowledge and understanding that could be missed or overlooked in the more traditional text forms of data (MacIntyre, 2004). The arts are viewed as a valuable means for communicating complex social phenomena (Finley & Knowles, 1995) because of its ability to assist in the expression of the lived experience. By engaging the senses the arts can provide a means through which people can become more in touch with their experiences (Stein, 2003). The arts can be a way of stimulating the imagination and therefore providing greater access to the experienced world (Michael, 2009). As a form of qualitative research the arts medium captures empirical knowledge in the essence of an experience of a phenomenon and generates theory that is inductive by detecting patterns emerging from the data (Szto, Furman & Langer, 2005). Artistic approaches in research focus on the creation of

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meaning. Art seeks the creation of images that are meaningful and will shed light on situations that humans seek to understand. Visual imagery can be created in many different ways to represent the knowledge and understanding of the participants (Bown & Sumison, 2005).

The arts based inquiry in this study focusses on the process of creation and the accompanying expression of the lived experience. Through the creation of an artefact the structural relationship between the person experiencing the phenomenon and the lived experience of the phenomenon can be reflected. The interaction of the narrative and visual representations through creative processes enables the representation of the possible layers of complexity associated with the phenomenon (Finley, 2003). This approach to research in art moves away from the more conventional investigation of artistic pieces. The study of the processes of art has been described as practice based research (Sullivan, 2005). The subject of the analysis is not the final product but rather the lived experience as expressed within the visual image created. Using art in research requires both an analysis of the process and of the meaning contained within the images (Sullivan, 2006). The decision to utilise art created by the participants was based on the encouragement provided by Finley's (2003) point that "the unschooled minds of untrained artists can construct and express ideas through the media of the arts" (p. 292).

Data Generation

To describe the understanding of the early childhood educators lived experience of the impact of regulation a phenomenographic approach (Barnard et al, 1999) was used. Data was collected across two stages in this phenomenographic study. The first stage utilised an arts based inquiry approach as the participants created an arts informed plate. The second stage involved the use of the arts informed plates as a spark and anchor for semi structured interviews.

The intent of the interview is to reveal the qualitatively different ways the early childhood educators understand the following:
   a. What are the ways you understand regulation?
   b. How do you understand the impact of regulation on your professional identity?

In the first stage, the participants were asked to create an arts informed plate. The term 'arts informed' refers to any means of expression or imagery (e.g., drawings, sculpture, photographs, or poems) that the participant feels offers the maximum opportunity to represent understandings (Barry, 1996). The creation of an artistic piece as part of the project derives from the field of arts based inquiry where Knowles & Coles (2008) propose that this form of inquiry is "sufficiently fluid and flexible to serve …as a methodological enhancement to other research approaches…"(p. 60). To begin the process a discussion around the predetermined content was held and the participants were asked to create their arts informed plate expressing their lived experience of regulation. The participants were asked to produce the arts informed plate in a context of their own choosing within in a negotiated time frame.

In the second stage of the data collection process the arts informed plate, created by each individual participant, was used as a "spark" for the semi structured interview and the initial questions were framed around the plate. In focussing the initial questions on the arts informed plates Weber's (2008 in Knowles & Cole, 2008) five suggestions around how images can be utilised as components of inquiries were considered –
   • production of images as data,
   • using existing images as a springboard,
   • to provoke other data,
   • to be used as feedback
   • modes of interpretation (p. 47)

The semi structured interviews, supported by the creation of an arts informed plate, were conducted in at a time and place of the participant's choice. The semi structured interviews were recorded. An image of the arts informed plate has been recorded electronically. Audio recordings of the interviews

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have been captured and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews have been completed. The arts informed plates, audio recordings and transcriptions constitute the data for the study.

Data Analysis

The arts informed plates and interview transcripts were iteratively analysed following the phenomenographic approach. Readings of the transcripts of the interviews, whilst simultaneously viewing the associated arts informed plates, were conducted. In the phenomenographic approach the reliability of the study is promoted through the interpretive process because during this activity the researcher exercises interpretive awareness and maximum fidelity to the data (Sandberg, 1997). Validity in phenomenography is achieved through the transparency of the research process as the researcher clearly indicates the purpose of the study and the strategies by which they will achieve the end (Bowden, 2000). The researcher is to clearly indicate that they are interested in the participant's experiences of the phenomenon, that there is no right or wrong answer and no judgement will be made of the utterances that are presented (Mann, 2009). The researcher will stimulate the discussion using open ended questions based on the interview content to encourage the participant to explain the experiences further (Mann, 2009). In this study the arts informed plates created by the participants themselves assisted in the focus of the interview content both during the reflective period before the interviews and during the interview sessions. During the analysis the researcher is to view utterances within the whole of the transcript rather than viewing them out of context (Mann, 2009). The arts informed plates viewed simultaneously with the iterative reading of the transcript serviced to encapsulate the whole of the participants understanding of the impact of regulation, thus ensuring the researcher maintained the focus on the whole in context. From the verbatim transcripts and the art informed plates, the researcher familiarized, condensed, compared, grouped, labelled, and contrasted conceptions (Locsin & Matua, 2002) of the ways early childhood educators described their understanding of the impact of regulation.

Analysis of the data revealed categories of description of the understanding of early childhood educators of the impact of regulation. The categories of descriptions are developed out of the aspects of the experience of the participants (Bradbeer, Healey& Kneale, 2012). The analysis revealed that regulation was viewed as adding additional complexity across the profession. There were four distinct ways that regulation in early childhood education was understood to add further complexity for the profession:

1. regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to administration
2. regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to management
3. regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to leadership
4. regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to pedagogy.

Categories of Description 1: regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to administration.

In this category participant's experience regulation as adding more complexity to administration. Participants recognise that administration is necessary for effective early childhood education and a successful administrator is organised, completing required paper work, enacting official guidelines and developing necessary policy (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 1998). Regulation introduces new and additional administrative tasks as illustrated by the following quote and reference to arts informed plate:

> *I'm stretched to the limit, and it's like I'm stretched in every way* (pointing to the rubber bands in Figure 1). *So then there's no room for anything else. That's it. It's more paperwork and more being seen to be doing what I'm supposed to be doing, because I think "they'll check that I've got the paper work in place to show what I've been doing". There are seven elements of the NQF and so one, two three, four, five, six, seven* (pointing to the nails in Figure 1). *So then there's no room for*

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anything else. [Participant 18].

Figure 1. Arts Informed Plate by Participant 18.

Categories of Description 2: regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to management.

In this category participant's experience regulation as adding more complexity to management. Management is a complex task including the need for communication skills, staff supervision, and program evaluation (Ebbeck et al, 1998). Participants understand management being complicated by the disruption of staff relationships as illustrated by the following quote and reference to arts informed plate:

> *I think um relationships within even a small little staff like this have the potential to become strained because everybody is so stressed about it at and overworked* (pointing to "Social" in Figure 2) *and trying to do the right thing that um people start to be bit more critical than they used to be and a bit less accepting of differences and you know they're just little things that I've noticed [Participant 1].*

Figure 2. Arts Informed Plate by Participant 1

Categories of Description 3: regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to leadership.

Participants experience regulation as adding more complexity to leadership in early childhood education. Leadership requires early childhood educators to engage in consultation and communication, decision making by agreement, fostering relationships and advocacy (McCrea, 2015). Participants understand regulation complicating leadership by challenges to advocacy as illustrated by the following quote and reference to arts informed plate:

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……like it's an exciting change and hopefully we will be recognised in the community for what we do, really do, not just for what is seen, what the communities think they see what we do. So with mine, I've got like all the planning (points to arts informed plate see Figure 3*), learning more about the national quality standards, what's expected of us, trying to fit in the outcomes, making sure that it all leads in and let my families know this [Participant 10].*

Figure 3. Arts Informed Plate by Participant 10

Categories of Description 4: regulation in early childhood is understood to add further complexity to pedagogy.

Pedagogy refers the art and science of teaching which includes relationships, considered approaches to the learner and teaching practise (Dalli, 2008). The impact of regulation on pedagogy is illustrated by the following quote and reference to arts informed plate

We run a very sustainable kindy here. The community contributes a lot supplying left over materials. The children are encouraged to create by recycling things. I have used recycled things to make this piece (points to the arts informed plate see figure 1). *…. Everyone is really liking it, to tell you the truth. So for them to come in and criticise us now, and if they did get a bad mark, I think, yes, I would take it personally [Participant 18].*

Conclusion

Phenomenography aims to describe the variations in people's experiences through their own discourse and for analyzing meaning that people ascribe to their world. The traditional data collection method in a phenomenographic study is through semi structured interviews. The ability of this approach to enable a deep examination of the phenomenon has been questioned. In this paper a methodological elaboration (part of a doctoral study in progress) has been devised as a response to this question. The combination of an arts based inquiry technique with the traditional semi- structured interview technique has been shown to encourage the participants to engage more deeply with their understandings of the impact of regulation on their pedagogy and practice. The data collection process commenced with the participants creating an arts informed plate providing the opportunity for reflection on the phenomenon under discussion prior to the interview. This arts informed plate then served as a spark for the semi structured interview. Throughout the interview sessions the participants returned to their plate anchoring their discussion within aspects of their creation. During the analysis stage the transcribed interviews were "read" with the accompanying arts informed plates and the conceptions of the early childhood educators were revealed.

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