

**DEVELOPING EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVOCATES:  
THE ROLE OF UNDERGRADUATE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN NEW  
SOUTH WALES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The early childhood education sector in Australia is currently the focus of significant government policy reviews. Early childhood teachers are well positioned to actively participate in such policy development processes by advocating for the rights and best interests of young children at this political or systems level. However, the undertaking of systems advocacy is complicated by multiple constructions of professionalism that can hinder teachers to view advocacy as a core professional responsibility.

This study investigated undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs as constructors of teacher professionalism that support or promote the practice of systems advocacy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven academics who convened units with advocacy content within programs in New South Wales. The study found that advocacy, particularly systems advocacy, is incorporated to a varied and generally limited extent. Participants utilised different approaches to develop an advocacy disposition in their students, some by encouraging students to reflect on their values and beliefs and others by developing critical thinking skills. These findings can be attributed to multiple constructions of professionalism – from accreditation bodies, pre-service teachers, and the participating academics – that present opportunities and constraints to the inclusion of advocacy in teacher education programs.

This study offers a theoretical framework for the development of an advocacy disposition using the constructions of teacher professionalism. This framework could be used in undergraduate programs to strengthen critical thinking skills that

may enable teachers' development as advocates for children, families and the early childhood profession.



### STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher degree institution. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Ethics approval was obtained from Macquarie University's Human Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Ethics approval 5201400409).

Signed 

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The number of children enrolled in formal early childhood education (ECE) settings across Australia has increased since 1999 and this increase is projected to continue. Today, one million children birth to five years are enrolled in federally government approved or state/territory funded formal, regulated ECE (DEEWR, 2013; Productivity Commission, 2012). Young children are also spending more time in formal ECE, with children today in long day care for an average of 26 hours a week.

A strong evidence base from neuroscience, social science and econometric research unequivocally demonstrates that when formal ECE is of high quality, developmental outcomes for children are enhanced and families' wellbeing is promoted (OECD, 2006; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). High quality ECE also ameliorates social disadvantage, facilitates women's workforce participation, and fosters social inclusion (Economic Intelligence Unit, 2012; Heckman & Masteroy, 2004). Recent analyses by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2014) estimated that by 2050, investment in quality ECE in Australia will yield an increase of \$7.0 to \$9.3 billion to Australia's gross domestic product (GDP).

Despite this overwhelming evidence, Australia still lacks a system of high quality ECE. In 2006, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on early childhood education and care (ECEC) highlighted Australia's "complex and multi-layered system of policy development, funding and provision for ECEC" (OECD, 2006, p. 267). The Innocenti Report Card (UNICEF, 2008) also showed that Australia only met two out of ten ECEC benchmarks, ranking the country 23rd out of the 25 OECD countries included. Additionally,

Brennan and Fenech (2014) problematise the limited support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to access quality ECE programs. National and international reports highlight the need for a system that supports provision of high quality and accessible ECE services in the country.

Review of the current Coalition Government's policy directions reveals that a system of quality ECE is unlikely to be developed under the current federal government given its privileging of ECE services as a means to support workforce participation. The focus of the Coalition's Policy for Better Child Care and Early Learning (Coalition, 2013), for example, is "how the child care system can be made more flexible, affordable and accessible" (p. 4). Very limited attention is given to 'quality' and indeed, there is a suggestion that quality standards embedded in the National Quality Framework (NQF) – Australia's system of regulation and quality assurance for ECE services (Institute of Early Childhood, 2014) may need to be compromised.

Charged by the Coalition Government to review ECE in Australia with a view to making the system more accessible, affordable and flexible, the Productivity Commission (2014) recently produced a Draft Report that contains recommendations that, if implemented, will compromise quality standards and quality early learning experiences for young children. To increase affordability of ECE services, for example, the Commission proposes a number of changes including reducing qualifications for staff working with children 0-3 years to a certificate III, weakening staff-to-child ratios, and removing of preschools from the scope of the NQF. These recommendations contradict the overwhelming research on the benefits of quality ECE for the development of young children.

An additional and longstanding challenge to the provision of a quality system of ECE in Australia is a stable and qualified workforce (Early Childhood Australia, 2011). In its review of the early childhood workforce, the Productivity Commission (2011) highlighted that the sector was hampered by high staff turnover, a shortage of early childhood teachers, low pay, and poor working conditions. Current and recommended policies fail to address these workforce issues (Coalition, 2013; Productivity Commission, 2014).

The political context of ECE in Australia, particularly with the reform agenda of the current Coalition Government, highlights the critical need for strong advocacy. As noted by Early Childhood Australia (2011), “the world that is inherited by future generations of young children is constructed in a present that is determined by policy decisions of adult citizens today” (p. 10). It seems incumbent on early childhood stakeholders today to advocate for children and for a system of quality ECE.

An important question to address, however, is who should be doing this advocacy work. In particular, do early childhood teachers have a professional responsibility to undertake such advocacy work? To explore this question further, it is crucial to examine the concept of teacher professionalism within the context of early childhood. Whether advocacy is early childhood educators’ responsibility requires an understanding of how early childhood professional practice is constructed as some constructions may include scope for advocacy, while others may exclude it.

## **The issue with early childhood professionalism**

Early childhood professionalism is socially constructed – it changes over time, in every culture, political, social and economic context (Grieshaber, 2001; Woodrow, 2007). That the knowledge base of the early childhood sector has historically been influenced by diverse professions such as health, social work and education, has contributed to the complexity of the field and the ambiguity of the professional identity of the early childhood educator (Woodrow, 2007). Early childhood professional roles have also evolved as the working environment continues to change and challenge educators to ‘act professionally’ (Urban, 2008).

Urban (2008) further suggests that “early childhood practice is a constant co-construction – and therefore necessarily open and undeterminable” (p. 144). Accordingly, there is scope for teachers to actively participate in its construction (Osgood, 2006a). The key is for teachers to critically reflect on, analyse and deconstruct different constructions of professionalism and to understand the implications of these constructions on their practice (Osgood).

To that end, what follows is an examination of various constructions of early childhood professionalism that circulate in the Australian context and how each one may support or hinder the practice of systems advocacy as part of a teacher’s professional role. In this thesis, ‘systems advocacy’ refers to advocating at the political level for government policies, provisions (funding and programs) and legislation that are in the best interests of children, families and the early childhood profession (Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley, & Shepherd, 2012). ‘Teachers’ refers to university qualified early childhood professionals. ‘Educators’ refers to all staff employed in ECE settings who work directly with



children. This term thus includes qualified and unqualified staff, the former including early childhood teachers as well as diploma and certificate trained child care workers.

### **The multiple constructions of early childhood professionalism and their influence on systems advocacy**

#### *Educators are expected to advocate*

A Code of Ethics was developed by Australia's peak early childhood organisation as a guide for early childhood professional practice in the early 1990s (Stonehouse & Woodrow, 1992). Revised in 2006 (Early Childhood Australia, 2006), the Code of Ethics positions advocacy as a professional responsibility of all educators. Of note is that the Code refers specifically to systems advocacy in the following sections:

*"In relation to communities, I will... advocate for the development and implementation of laws and policies that promote child-friendly communities and work to change those that work against child and family wellbeing. Utilise knowledge and research to advocate for universal access to a range of high-quality early childhood programs for all children.*

*In relation to myself as a professional, I will... advocate in relation to issues that impact on my profession and on young children and their families" (Early Childhood Australia, 2006, pp. 3-4).*

From these excerpts, the Code promotes a construction of professionalism whereby early childhood educators advocate for the best interests of children and families by participating in the policy-making process. Furthermore, it asserts that

educators identify and take action on issues that affect not only children but the early childhood profession as well.

The Code seems to imply that undertaking such systems advocacy is a fairly straightforward practice of what it regards as the 'early childhood professional'. What is less clear however, is whether educators – and particularly teachers – perceive their professional practice in this way. The multiple constructs of professionalism discussed below suggest that what constitutes professional practice and whether this includes advocacy, is more complicated than it appears to be in the Code of Ethics.

#### *Educators are babysitters*

The public perception of ECE as simply child-minding that any female who has innate mothering skills can do contributes greatly to the low status and poor working conditions of educators working in prior-to-school settings (Wong, 2007). Society's undervaluing of ECE reinforces ideas that early childhood spaces are non-pedagogical, non-educational and do not warrant early childhood educators to be registered and accredited as teachers, which is the dominant view of being 'professional' (Woodrow, 2007). Changing the public construction of ECE seemingly requires teachers to be advocates at the systems level. Is there scope for action, however, within this low-status context? Ebbeck's (1990) assertion that the authority to advocate strengthens as professional status increases suggests not. Perhaps, given the poor status of the sector, undertaking systems advocacy may be perceived by teachers to be futile as teachers' voices are not strong enough to be heard.

### *Educators are to remain in the classroom with children*

The early childhood educator's role has conventionally concentrated on teaching, learning and the development of children within the classroom (Stonehouse & Woodrow, 1992). Accordingly, depictions of the early childhood teacher as patient, devoted and naturally able to tend to children's needs (as illustrated by Stonehouse, 1989) continues to dominate societal understandings of an educator. Additionally, Grieshaber (2001) highlights that the discourse of developmentally appropriate practice firmly positions teaching as confined to the classroom. This construction, she argues, mitigates teachers' undertaking of advocacy.

### *Educators are technicians*

Characterised by a focus on technical competence, accountability, performativity and externally mandated standardised practice, regulatory requirements construct professionalism as a technical practice that any staff can administer (Fenech, Sumsion, & Shepherd, 2010; Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002; Osgood, 2006a). Moreover, the onus to meet regulatory accountabilities can be a burden on teachers' time (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2006). Operating within such regulatory constraints therefore may further reduce the opportunity, capacity and willingness of educators to reimagine professionalism and advocate at the systems level (Osgood, 2006a; Woodrow, 2007).

### *Educators must be activist professionals*

More optimistically, academics such as Sachs (2000) and Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) propose that an alternative form professionalism is emerging in reaction to the dominant technical perspective. This alternative poses a challenge

for educators to critically analyse policy and discourse so as to ethically and justly uphold the needs and rights of children and families (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002). The activist professional will move beyond prescribed technicist discourses and will seek to construct teacher professionalism through the process of debate, collaboration and dialogue with colleagues that requires active trust and building strong networks and cultures of learning (Sachs, 2000). Collective action is said to benefit all stakeholders including the governments and children (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002) and improve the status of the early childhood sector (Sachs, 2000).

Such activist professionalism portrays an ideal early childhood sector where teachers collectively use their voice to advocate for the needs and rights of children, families and the profession. This view undoubtedly provides space for undertaking systems advocacy. Sachs (2000) admits, however, that becoming an activist professional is difficult as it entails shedding previously held beliefs and reinventing professional identity by moving outside the classroom and communicating with colleagues and other stakeholders such as communities and governments. The challenge may prove to be more difficult for those teachers who have more traditional views on being an early childhood professional.

*But educators are nice ladies who love children*

More than twenty years ago Stonehouse (1989) argued that the dominant construction of early childhood professionals is that of “nice ladies who love children” (p. 78). This phrase that is still commonly heard and used characterises early childhood educators as warm, nurturing women who care for children and tend to their needs.

There is seemingly a concern that professionalism, specifically activist professionalism, will require “shedding the shackles from the past” (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002, p. 353) and leave the nurturing aspect of ECE behind for a more politically oriented sector. Within the dominant construction of educators as nice ladies is the lack of empowerment, confidence and self-worth of the feminine early childhood workforce to assert their professional insights that stems from self-reflection and knowledge sharing (Osgood, 2006a). It decreases space for teachers’ practice of systems advocacy as the traits associated with advocacy, such as risk taking, engaging in confrontation and conflict, critiquing and negotiating (Grieshaber, 2001) are believed to be contrary to being nice and nurturing ladies, whose role is thought to be confined to the classroom working with children.

*The middle ground: multiple roles can co-exist*

It has long been argued that early childhood educators must understand that their role is not limited to working with children inside the classroom but extends to include working with teams, families, colleagues and communities outside the early childhood setting, and possibly governments as well (Stonehouse, 1989). Grasping the idea of having multiple professional identities may be the first step to recognising that early childhood educators can be warm, caring and nurturing and, at the same time, confident, assertive and articulate advocates (Grieshaber, 2001).

Early childhood educators can be ‘professional’ within the commonly dismissed feminine characteristics that are deemed to be ‘unprofessional’. An ethic of care and emotional labour that are embodied in characteristics such as altruism, community spirit and self-sacrifice are crucial aspects of early childhood professional identity that can act as a self-regulatory mechanism, negating the

need for standardised measures promoted by the regulatory environment (Osgood, 2006a; Woodrow, 2007). Fenech et al. (2010) provide a case study of resistance-based teacher professionalism that constitute advocacy on a day to day basis, showing how educators can develop their own alternative construction of professionalism and professional identity. The educators in this particular case study did not rely on externally mandated standards but on their own personal judgement and professional autonomy to make ethical and socially just decisions that would benefit children, families and themselves as educators.

Within a balanced construction of professionalism, teachers can incorporate both the feminine attributes that capture the ethic of caring and emotional labour and the high levels of self-confidence to be assertive. This balance can help teachers defend the value of these feminine attributes as opposed to the technical view of professionalism often imposed on the sector (Osgood, 2006b). Creating space to discuss these alternative constructions may allow for the undertaking of systems advocacy that can improve the professional status of the early childhood sector (Stonehouse, 1989).

This section has highlighted discourses of ECE professionalism that diminish the need for and capacity of teachers to practice systems advocacy as promoted by the Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). These discourses pertain to the view of teachers as babysitters who remain in the classroom with children and practice as technicians. A middle ground has been promoted as a way forward, where multiple identities of teachers as nurturers and advocates co-exist, but how might this middle ground be established?

## **Aim and Research Questions**

Woodrow (2007) suggests that apart from historical and industrial conditions, training institutions can provide a space for constructions of early childhood professionalism to be developed. The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate early childhood teacher education programs as constructors of professionalism that supports and promotes the practice of systems advocacy. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs in New South Wales incorporate a focus on systems advocacy?
2. Do particular units aim to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions for early childhood teachers to be strong and effective advocates in and for the sector?
3. What are the opportunities and constraints for the inclusion of systems advocacy content in undergraduate teacher education programs in NSW?

## **Thesis Outline**

This chapter has contextualised ECE in Australia, demonstrated the critical need for systems advocacy and explored the construction of professionalism to theorise teachers' undertaking of systems advocacy. The next chapter, Chapter Two provides an overview of the conceptual literature and empirical research on advocacy in early childhood and its relationship to teacher education programs. Chapter Three then uses the constructivist research paradigm to justify the use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews to investigate academics' perspectives on

systems advocacy in undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs. Chapter Four uses a thematic analysis to address the three research questions and present findings on how systems advocacy is incorporated into undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs, how advocacy knowledge, skills and dispositions are developed within those programs, and how the constructions of professionalism held by different stakeholders present opportunities and constraints to the inclusion of advocacy in teacher education programs. Chapter Five critically analyses these findings by discussing the study's contribution to the academic literature and to the ECE sector, acknowledges the limitations of the study and recommends future directions for research.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Chapter One demonstrated the critical need for strong advocacy for a system for quality ECE in Australia. It questioned if advocacy was indeed a part of early childhood educators' professional responsibilities and explored whether constructions of early childhood professional practice provides scope for the practice of systems advocacy. It also questioned the role of teacher education programs as sites that constructed teacher professionalism in ways that supported systems advocacy as a professional responsibility.

This chapter addresses this latter question by critically reviewing the conceptual literature and empirical research on advocacy in ECE and the potential role of teacher education programs in developing early childhood teachers as advocates. It argues that although the conceptual literature asserts that teachers should and do engage in advocacy at the systems level, the limited empirical research highlights challenges to its practice. The chapter also suggests that early childhood teacher education programs can play a role in developing teachers as advocates and concludes by communicating the need for further research in this particular area.

### **Literature search strategies**

An initial literature search using the terms advocacy and early childhood was conducted using Multisearch on Macquarie University's online library site. This search yielded over 19,000 results, comprising of a combination of books and journal articles. Limiters that first confined the results to books that were available within the Macquarie University library were applied. Books were included in the

search strategy for a number of reasons. First, books start the process of exploring a particular area of interest (Ridley, 2008). Second, as per Wallace and Wray (2011) books have an introductory nature that make the concepts being discussed accessible. Third, given that this study focuses on the inclusion of systems advocacy in undergraduate teacher education programs, it was considered crucial that texts that pre-service teachers are potentially reading be included in the literature review. Ten books and book chapters were identified as relevant to this literature review: three edited book chapters, two chapters from scholarly books and five textbooks that were targeted at either pre-service or practicing early childhood educators.

A database search that employed free-text, thesaurus and Boolean searching (Booth, Papaioannou, & Sutton, 2012) was then undertaken. This search strategy identified the majority of the literature included in this review. Seven early childhood and education databases were used to source relevant literature: ERIC (ProQuest online), PsycInfo (Ovid Technologies), A+ Education (Informit), EBSCOhost, JStor, Taylor & Francis online, and Sage online. The search terms 'advoc\*' and 'early childhood' were used to conduct the preliminary search. These results were then combined using the Boolean operators: AND 'teacher preparation' OR 'pre-service' OR 'preservice'; AND 'professionalism'; AND 'leadership'; AND 'social policy' OR 'policy. The preliminary search terms were then replaced with 'activis\*' and 'early childhood' and combined using the same Boolean operators to refine the search. Limiters were also applied to focus all searches to full-text, peer-reviewed articles from 1980-2014. Search results included many articles related to children with special needs and social work that

were outside the scope of this study, thus additional limiters were used. Journals within the databases that were related to early childhood, education, teacher education, higher education, and educational leadership were included while those related to special education and social work were excluded. The titles and abstracts of each article sourced were screened for relevance and those identified to be relevant were read in full.

Bibliographic searching (Booth et al., 2012) was subsequently undertaken in an attempt to retrieve as many relevant sources possible. This search strategy involved screening the reference lists of the articles read and retrieving those deemed to be relevant to this literature review. This process identified two edited book chapters and five unpublished theses and dissertations – one undergraduate honours thesis and four doctoral dissertations. From these search strategies, a total of 52 relevant sources were retrieved.

### **Overview of articles retrieved**

A database of the relevant sourced literature was developed in an Excel spreadsheet. This database was used to categorise the literature reviewed according to source (books, book chapters, edited book chapters, journal articles, and theses/dissertations); country where the research was undertaken or which context is being described; and type (conceptual or empirical). Table 1 provides a summary of these categories that contributed to the analysis of the current available literature on the concept of systems advocacy in early childhood.

Table 1. Overview of literature

<b>Source</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>No.</b>
Books	3	Australia	19	Conceptual	36
Book chapters	4	Canada	1	Empirical	16
Edited book chapters	3	New Zealand	4	Qualitative	13 <sup>1</sup>
Journal articles	37	UK	1	Quantitative	1
Theses/dissertations	5	USA	28	Mixed Methods	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>53<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>
<sup>1</sup> Two of the qualitative articles are reported from the same study					
<sup>2</sup> One book chapter includes perspectives from both Australia and New Zealand					

Literature on advocacy in early childhood emerged in the 1980s and continues today. Eight articles were written between the 80s and the 90s, all of them conceptual in nature. From the 2000s to date, 43 articles, a combination of conceptual and empirical, were written. It is notable however, that majority of the literature is conceptual, with only 16 empirical studies emerging since the 2000s. Eleven of these 16 empirical studies were conducted overseas, one in Canada and ten in the United States. Additionally, of the 52 sources, less than half (n=22) discuss the inclusion of advocacy in teacher education programs and of these only 11 specifically address advocacy at the systems level.

The five Australian empirical papers were derived from four studies (one study reported twice as an honours thesis and a journal article). Collectively, these studies discuss early childhood educators' perspectives on advocacy, advocacy as a leadership responsibility, and influences on politicians' decision-making. On the other hand, in the United States, studies focused more on advocacy course content in undergraduate and postgraduate pre-service teacher education programs, pre-service and practicing teachers' perceptions of advocacy, partnerships of

researchers and professional advocacy organisations, and the perceived impact of advocacy work undertaken by early childhood peak organisations. The discrepancy between the amount and scope of empirical research conducted in Australia and the United States identifies that there is scope for conducting more Australian research on systems advocacy and teacher education programs in the early childhood sector.

### **Analysis of the literature**

Thematic analysis is a method used to describe data in relation to the research topic by “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The researcher plays an active role in processing and interpreting the data so as to develop themes that link together into a coherent story (Braun & Clarke). Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the literature retrieved for this review to provide a rich description through themes across the data set, in this case being the literature pertaining to advocacy in the context of EC and how it relates to teacher education programs.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of undertaking a thematic analysis that were applied in analysing the literature for this review.

Phase 1 consisted of familiarisation by reading and re-reading the data to provide a foundation for analysis. To begin this phase, the Masters candidate and her supervisor read five articles to ensure accuracy and consistency in developing a preliminary foundation. Important details for analysis were noted and organised into two broad categories to break down the concept of advocacy. The first category – ‘how advocacy was talked about’ – contained levels of advocacy, the

skills, attributes or dispositions of advocates, and the facilitators and barriers to the training for and practice of advocacy. The second category – ‘who were identified to be advocates’ – included teacher educators, early childhood teachers, early childhood leaders, and professional advocates from peak organisations.

Phase 2 involved generating initial codes that could be organised into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005 cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, all articles were re-read and coded using the broad categories that were identified in Phase 1. Conceptual and empirical articles were coded separately, although the same broad categories were used for both groups of articles.

Phase 3 proceeded with the codes being organised into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From the codes generated in Phase 2, thematic maps were used as visual representations for the themes. The maps were generated from the conceptual and empirical articles separately to examine whether the themes that emerged were mainly from empirical studies, conceptual articles or a mix of both.

Phase 4 required refinement of the initial themes from the previous phase, such that themes were clearly identified and distinguished from each other (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The excerpts under each code and initial theme were collated for review. The data was then re-read and refined to form a coherent thematic map that told the overall story about the literature gathered on advocacy in early childhood in relation to teacher education programs.

Phase 5 investigated the themes more closely, identifying the essence that each theme captured and presenting a detailed analysis of each theme in relation to the overall story that the data should be telling (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data

collated within each theme were reviewed and arranged to provide a coherent analysis, with themes named to capture the essence of what each was about.

Phase 6 presents “a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” by using enough data to justify the occurrence of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). The next section of this review tells this story through themes derived from an analysis of the literature on advocacy in early childhood and how teacher education programs are positioned within the field. The themes identified and presented in this literature review are: (a) what is systems advocacy, (b) why engaging in systems advocacy is important, (c) the facilitation of systems advocacy with knowledge, skills, and dispositions, (d) the challenges to systems advocacy, which include fragmentation and framing and the reluctance to identify as early childhood advocates, (e) the development of advocacy through teacher education programs, and (f) the need for further research on advocacy in teacher education programs.

### **What is systems advocacy?**

National and international early childhood literature has consistently promoted a number of key ideas about advocacy. Advocacy is described as actions that are taken to promote and defend the rights of others (Gibbs, 2003). It requires a proactive stance (Jensen & Hannibal, 2000; Kieff, 2009) that seeks to influence change for the best interests of various stakeholders (Fenech, Giugni, & Bown, 2012; Waniganayake et al., 2012). In early childhood, advocacy means being a voice for children or a “children’s champion” (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003, p. 166) who can advance children’s rights and a social justice agenda.

Advocacy can be enacted on different levels – the micro and the macro contexts. The micro context involves advocating for children and families on a personal or centre level while the macro context takes advocacy outside of individual early childhood settings and into communities, the wider public, and the political arena (Kieff, 2009; Waniganayake et al., 2012). Fennimore (1989) and Kieff (2009) suggest that all levels of advocacy are fluid, overlapping and can influence positive change, however, Waniganayake et al. (2012) argue that advocacy on the macro level makes a greater impact for the early childhood sector. Systems advocacy, also called political advocacy (Fennimore, 1989), can be positioned within the far end of the advocacy spectrum. It starts from a conscious decision to observe the external politics that shape early childhood settings and moves to participating in the political arena (Fennimore, 1989) and targeting change to government policy and legislation. Systems advocacy involves obtaining big picture changes and addressing issues of government policy for the provision of more accessible, affordable, equitable and high quality early childhood services (Kagan, 1989; Waniganayake et al., 2012).

Literature across contexts, especially the United States and Australia, consistently discusses systems advocacy in these ways. It is notable however, that definitions of systems advocacy are limited to the conceptual literature, largely written by scholars and academics in the early childhood field. Empirical research is needed to enable theorising of systems advocacy that is based on a wide range of perspectives, including that of academics, educators and possibly peak advocacy organisations. It is important to gather this range of perspectives as this group of



early childhood professionals have the potential to do the advocacy work that is critical to the provision of quality in the early childhood sector.

### **Why is engaging in systems advocacy important?**

Early childhood academics have historically and more recently argued that all early childhood educators have a professional and ethical responsibility to act as advocates for young children and families (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Goffin & Lombardi, 1988; Kieff, 2009; Smith, 2007; Waniganayake et al., 2012). In particular, governments' increased interest in and influence on ECE makes it incumbent on educators to be united in advocating for the importance of ECE at the systems level (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012). Early childhood teachers are considered to be experts on the nature and needs of young children, and thus well situated to advocate for their best interests (Dever, 2006; Kagan, 1989; Waniganayake et al., 2012). They must contribute to the blueprint that guides future early childhood policy by bringing key issues forward and advocating for the interests of children, families and the profession to governments and the public (Fennimore, 1989; May, 2006). It is especially important for teachers in the field to get involved in the political arena as legislators and representatives may lack the experience, expertise and exposure to the needs of children and families (Dever, 2006; Pillow-Price, 2009).

Participating in the political arena is also important as ECE is inherently political (Rodd, 1997). Critical policy decisions are made at the systems level but policy can be shaped, changed and interpreted by the voices of multiple actors who engage in various stages of the political process (Press & Skattebol, 2007). Early childhood educators must represent the sector by being its voice (Sumsion, 2006) and

countering the influence of consumer and business discourses on government policy (Bown, 2013). Literature from Australia and New Zealand particularly emphasises the use of children's rights and social justice as the underpinning of systems advocacy efforts to contradict market-driven and economic discourses (Smith, 2007) or to complement alternative discourses to attain government and public support (Bown, 2013; Wong, 2007).

Public policies naturally affect early childhood educators' work with children (Lombardi, 1986). The direct influence of public policy on the work of early childhood educators can be viewed as an incentive for stronger involvement in systems advocacy. Additionally, Goffin and Lombardi (1988) stress that improving the lives of children and families means moving away from the restricting walls of the classroom and individual services. Early childhood educators, as intentional leaders, must take an active role in the political arena to influence policies that dictate the curriculum and quality of programs, types of early childhood services and who attends these services (Waniganayake et al., 2012), in addition to other critical issues that have the potential to help or harm early childhood services and impinge on the needs and rights of young children (Pillow-Price, 2009; Smith, 2007). For example, key improvements to early childhood policy in New Zealand was driven by advocacy by various stakeholders, including early childhood educators, at the systems level (May, 2006, 2007). May (2006) describes the development of New Zealand early childhood pedagogy, most recently the *Te Whariki*, through the critical influence of professional advocacy on public policy. Influencing positive change in the political arena has the potential to improve the

experiences, development and outcomes of children in the early childhood sector (Carpenter & Brewer, 2012; Goffin, 1988).

Advocacy at the systems level is also viewed as a way to increase the professional status and working conditions of the early childhood profession (Ebbeck, 1990; Fraser, 2000; Meyer, 2005) by promoting and persuading the general public and governments of the importance and benefits of ECE (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; May, 2006). As early childhood educators participate in the process of systems advocacy, they create opportunities for critical engagement with the issues surrounding early childhood policies, and imagine and work toward alternative futures (Press & Skattebol, 2007; Sumsion, 2006). In the process, the early childhood workforce can become unified and create a stronger social and political image that enables them to mobilise change (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Fennimore, 1989; Liebovich & Adler, 2009). Consequently, connecting with the public establishes a culture that values the importance of the profession and increases concern for the education and care of young children (Fennimore, 1989; Ramgopal, Dieterle, Aviles, McCreedy, & Davis, 2009).

Despite the apparent unequivocal validation that practicing systems advocacy is a part of an educator's professional responsibilities, some contradictions are also embedded within the conceptual literature. Advocacy is described as going "*beyond* (my emphasis) the educational responsibilities" of the job (Goffin & Lombardi, 1988), a commitment "*beyond* (my emphasis) remunerated professional responsibilities" (Fennimore, 1989), "a natural and necessary *extension* (my emphasis) of responsibilities of early childhood professionals" (Kieff, 2009). Such discussion of systems advocacy suggests that advocacy may be regarded as an

extension of, or an extra, rather than core component of one's professional practice. As noted earlier, constructions of professionalism can support or hinder the practice of advocacy; these arguments point to a construction of professional identity that excludes advocacy as a core professional role.

### **Facilitating systems advocacy with knowledge, skills and dispositions**

Scholars have identified a knowledge and skill base that is specific to the practice of systems advocacy. A number of books and journal articles contain how-to strategies for undertaking systems advocacy that may serve as practical guides for early childhood advocates (see for example Gibbs, 2003; Goffin & Lombardi, 1988; Jensen & Hannibal, 2000; Meyer, 2005; Pillow-Price, 2009) and Sumsion (2006) provides a theoretical framework to complement this body of literature. The framework encapsulates the knowledge and skill base of systems advocacy into three categories: critical imagination, critical literacy, and critical action.

Central to critical imagination is a bold vision for an ideal, more equitable and just world (Fenech et al., 2012; Press & Skattebol, 2007; Sumsion, 2006). A firm grasp of the knowledge base can assist advocates to envision a high quality ECE system that works for the best interests of children, families and the profession. Early childhood teachers must be familiar with, identify and recognise issues and concerns within their personal context, how it relates to their practice and the wider early childhood field (Brunson, 2002; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Jensen, 2004; Kieff, 2009; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Furthermore, government and community policies that affect early childhood service provision should be part of early childhood advocates' knowledge base (Ebbeck, 1990; Jensen, 2004). Finally, there should also be awareness and understanding of political and

legislative processes and terminology, government structures, economic agendas that constitute the dynamics of early childhood politics (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Kagan, 1989; Lombardi, 1986; May, 2006; Pillow-Price, 2009; Wong, 2007). Mastering the knowledge base can prepare advocates to apply the skills that are identified as the core to the practice of systems advocacy.

Critical literacy begins with a critical engagement with and examination of established knowledge bases – policies, dominant discourses on professionalism, best practice and research (Davey, 2000; Fenech et al., 2012; Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Liebovich & Adler, 2009; Sumsion, 2006; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). It involves exploring underpinnings of dominant discourses through different lenses (Davey, 2000; Waniganayake et al., 2012) and thinking of alternative ways of understanding otherwise stagnant and accepted policies (Press & Skattebol, 2007). Advocates must be able to identify ‘points of vulnerability’ within these discourses and use them to further an advocacy agenda (Bown, 2013; Dever, 2006; Sumsion, 2006; Taba, 1999).

Critical action stems from the critical engagement with government agendas and continues with forging alliances within and beyond the early childhood community (Sumsion, 2006). Collaboration is an essential skill that facilitates systems advocacy. Advocates must recognise that joining professional organisations, forming partnerships with stakeholders within and outside the early childhood field, building coalitions, networking and developing contacts can facilitate putting forward advocacy agendas (Fenech et al., 2012; Gibbs, 2003; Kagan, 1989; Rodd, 1997; Taba, 1999). Nurturing these networks and professional relationships provides opportunity for collaboration to analyse and discuss issues from different

perspectives and work effectively to develop proposals for advocacy agendas (Fennimore, 1989; Goffin & Lombardi, 1988; Kagan, 1989; Kieff, 2009). Collaboration can also enable the effective research, gathering and documenting of information that will be needed for advocacy efforts (Jensen, 2004; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Research and collaboration can also enable advocates to identify which issues to bring forward (Covington Soul, 2008). Additionally, collaboration can mobilise grass roots networks (Castle & Ethridge, 2003) that strengthens the early childhood sector to have a greater influence in the public and political arena.

The skill that is most frequently cited within the literature on systems advocacy is communication. Advocacy requires effective communication (Gibbs, 2003) to get educators' message across to society and the government (Lombardi, 1986). Advocates must be able to articulate and defend their position on particular issues by speaking at conferences, to the media, and at government proceedings (Davey, 2000; Ebbeck, 1990; Fennimore, 1989; Jensen, 2004; Kagan, 1989; Rodd, 1997). Advocates must also be able to convey messages through writing in professional publications and for a wide range of audiences (Rodd, 1997). Communication must also be strategic, creative, persuasive, simple, clear, and concise to ensure effectiveness of lobbying and campaigning efforts (Castle & Ethridge, 2003; Meyer, 2005; Swadener, 2003; Woodrow & Busch, 2008).

Continuous engagement in advocacy fosters the development of skills that increases educators' confidence in their expertise that they will be comfortable sharing beyond their classrooms (Fennimore, 1989). Understanding the knowledge base and critically engaging with policy and discourses enables the formation of new perspectives that become catalysts for new ideas and action

(Fasoli, Scrivens, & Woodrow, 2007; Press & Skattebol, 2007). Building knowledge and skills, therefore, can be a means of developing a disposition to advocate.

An altruistic, passionate commitment to social justice and children's rights is promoted in the literature as the foundational disposition of an early childhood advocate (Ebbeck, 1990; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Fennimore, 1989; Jensen, 2004; Smith, 2007). Advocates must also have a vision of a better future for children and the sector that fuels their belief that advocacy is a worthwhile endeavour (Bown, 2013; Fasoli et al., 2007; Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005). They must be confident to manoeuvre the unfamiliar political arena and take calculated risks (Gibbs, 2003; Meyer, 2005; Taba, 1999). Furthermore, the advocacy literature positions professionals as the voice of children. Advocacy requires persistence, patience, optimism, proactivity and assertiveness (Kieff, 2009; Pillow-Price, 2009; Rodd, 1996) driven by convictions and strong beliefs in being the voice for children in the society and government (Fennimore, 1989). Dispositions, however, are said to be as intrinsically motivated (Catapano, 2006; Liebovich & Adler, 2009), which then poses a question to whether a disposition can indeed be developed.

Some commentators argue that an advocacy disposition can be developed through training (Lombardi, 1986; Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012), wherein there are opportunities for critical reflection on experiences and belief systems that enable the development of a personal motivation to create change (Catapano, 2006). Lombardi (1986) emphasises that the main goal of including advocacy in teacher education programs is to build students' confidence and motivation to advocate. Jensen (2004) agrees, arguing that inclusion of advocacy in teacher education

programs can appeal to educators' professional and moral obligation to help others, and therefore advocate. Furthermore, the conceptual literature suggests that a key facilitator to educators undertaking systems advocacy is the building of knowledge, skills and dispositions to advocate; there is a perception that students and educators can develop the capacities to advocate (Sumsion, 2006) by building knowledge and skills that have been discussed earlier. Preparing pre-service educators with the knowledge, skills and dispositions within teacher education programs can thus support the development of early childhood educators as effective advocates for children, families and the profession (Jensen, 2004).

The ideas about systems advocacy presented thus far are derived from a wide variety of conceptual literature written by academics and aimed predominantly at pre-service and practicing early childhood educators. Therefore, this body of literature possibly creates a picture of systems advocacy that is simplistic and idealistic. The remainder of the literature review will re-evaluate the assertions made about educators' practice of systems advocacy by testing the conceptual ideas against the limited empirical research that explored systems advocacy from educators' perspectives. This will show that educators' practice of systems advocacy is more complicated than what is suggested in the conceptual literature.

### **The challenges to systems advocacy**

Notably, while there is an established need for early childhood educators' voices to be heard at the systems level, empirical research suggests that educators are rarely visible advocating in the political arena (Brunson, 2002; Fraser, 2000; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012). What follows is an analysis of the key barriers to early childhood educators' undertaking of systems advocacy: the fragmentation and framing of the



early childhood sector, the reluctance of early childhood educators to identify as advocates, and the challenges for teacher education programs developing educators as advocates. Each section will begin with a focus on how these ideas are discussed in the conceptual literature followed by a comparison and contrast with empirical research when applicable.

### **Fragmentation and framing**

ECE is characterised as a fragmented sector in Australia and internationally. This fragmentation is related to the early childhood workforce and to the mix of not-for-profit and for-profit service providers. The diversity of the workforce with educators having varied qualifications creates minimal space for united advocacy for a strengths-based and holistic view of children (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012). The diversity of staff also contributes to a lack of common interests, which leads to a lack of collective action (Covington Soul, 2008). Consequently, in a study conducted by Bown (2013) which explored the influences on politicians' policy decision making related to the 'One to four, make it law' staff:child ratios campaign, different service types were shown to put forward separate agendas. In effect, there is not one consistent, united message or clear vision being put forward by the early childhood sector.

Additionally, there are several advocacy groups whose conflicting values and interests causes fragmented approaches to advocacy and the lack of a collective advocacy voice (Fraser, 2000; Langford et al., 2013; Sumsion, 2006). In a US study that explored perceptions of the main influencers of policy in children's services, Fraser (2000) noted that early childhood educators and the community-based sector lack a strong advocacy voice. The fragmentation of the sector, therefore,

presents challenges for systems advocacy and diminishes educators' power to influence legislators (Covington Soul, 2008; Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005).

Further complicating the landscape of systems advocacy is the struggle to construct ECE in ways that garner government and public support (Wong, 2007). Smith (2007) asserts that advocacy efforts should adopt children's rights and social justice frames, while Wong (2007) suggests that constructing ECE as national work can propel advocacy agendas because of the benefit it presents to governments and society. However, framing ECE outside social justice and children's rights can influence policies from different directions without firm grounding (Press & Skattebol, 2007) and has the potential to construct children as property, parents as consumers and early childhood programs as services where quality is not essential (Wong, 2007). Varying and contradictory discourses about the purpose and content of early childhood programs weakens the pedagogical voice of early childhood educators to advocate (Woodrow & Busch, 2008).

### **Reluctance to identify as early childhood advocates**

#### *Passing the buck: who should be advocating*

Pre-service early childhood educators perceive that advocacy should be undertaken by someone who is remunerated to do the job (Davey, 2000), which indicates that advocacy is considered to be an undertaking that falls beyond the responsibilities of an educator. Research suggests that hesitation to participate in systems advocacy stems from a reluctance to be associated with leadership and power, causing a lack of educators' voices within the wider policy arena in

Australia (Fraser, 2000; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012). While leadership in early childhood is characterised as being distributive wherein all early childhood educators can be leaders regardless of position (Rodd, 2013), educators continue to tentatively associate themselves as leaders (Davey, 2000). Leadership is still not viewed as part of everyday practice (Fasoli et al., 2007). Research indicates that advocacy in practice is linked to positional and hierarchical leadership that reinforces early childhood educators' thinking about advocacy being undertaken by someone else rather than themselves (Liebovich & Adler, 2009; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012). Mevawalla's (2009) phenomenological study that explored the perceptions of 12 early childhood educators working in childcare settings across Sydney, Australia, found that educators viewed systems advocacy as the role of more powerful stakeholders such as directors, leaders and peak early childhood organisations, who were deemed to have a more legitimate advocacy role. For these participants, advocating at the political level would mean accessing power that is beyond their sphere of influence.

#### *Advocacy is not our responsibility*

Kagan (1989) and Fennimore (1989) also emphasise that the traditional view of the role of early childhood educators as apolitical and whose place is in the classroom working with children prevents them from seeing systems advocacy as an inherent part of their work. As noted in Chapter One, teachers' capacities to become activist professionals are challenged by dominant constructions of professionalism which concentrates on the learning and development of children and confines educators to classrooms to prioritise children's outcomes (see for example Grieshaber, 2001; Stonehouse & Woodrow, 1992).

The qualitative study conducted by Liebovich (2005) that examined six pre-service early childhood educators' perceptions and knowledge of advocacy demonstrates adherence to these views. Liebovich reported that early childhood educators viewed advocacy as beyond the responsibilities of a teaching contract, that it is a role that is separate and distinct, and that it requires extra effort and working outside classrooms. Other researchers also found that early childhood educators tend to prioritise internal functions, attending to the needs of children and families within the classroom walls and not concerning themselves with what goes on beyond centre activities (Covington Soul, 2008; Mevawalla, 2009). Beginning teachers in particular have been shown to be so concerned about coping with the stress of classroom teaching, time and resource management that they easily dismiss rocking the boat and taking action beyond the classroom (Couse & Russo, 2006; Covington Soul, 2008). Educators are comfortable and content within their classrooms, where they perceive and know their role to be in (Davey, 2000; Meyer, 2005; Taba, 1999). Even early childhood leaders perceive their role to be confined within the centre supervising staff and managing the service (Nupponen, 2005).

Additionally, early childhood educators' obligation to comply with regulatory requirements reduces the willingness and capacity of educators to advocate at the systems level (Woodrow, 2007). Advocacy becomes tangential to their immediate work with too many teacher responsibilities that demands too much of their time and energy (Fennimore, 1989; Kagan, 1989; Lombardi, 1986).

Research by Covington Soul (2008) which qualitatively explored a small group of elementary teachers' perspectives and experiences of advocacy through focus groups and interviews, supports these notions. Participants reported that their

reluctance to advocate emanates from the desire to be seen as good teachers who show their technical abilities, deny power and remain apolitical. Educators are placed in an intense working environment where a prescribed curriculum needs to be implemented, forcing them to spend less time with colleagues to establish a collaborative culture that enables critical engagement with policies to improve the capacity to advocate (Covington Soul, 2008; Liebovich & Adler, 2009; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012).

*Advocacy goes against our nature as [female] early childhood professionals*

Many early childhood educators are said to be initially drawn to the profession because of their nurturing and feminine characteristics (Davey, 2000). Dominant discourses such as developmentally appropriate practice consistently portray educators as warm, caring, gentle and patient who are responsive to children's needs (Grieshaber, 2001); "nice ladies who love children" (Stonehouse, 1989). Early childhood educators are perceived to have the natural ability to care for children, therefore not needing to pursue the study of children, the wider social, cultural, educational and political context (Tayler, 2000). On the other hand, systems advocacy has a negative connotation – it is perceived to involve conflict, contestation and even rebellion (Davey, 2000; Fennimore, 1989). Involvement in advocacy activities can be interpreted as being militant or self-serving (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003), traits that are incongruent with and inappropriate for early childhood educators (Kagan, 1989; Taba, 1999). The use of the terms advocacy and activism together and interchangeably also contributes to the negative attitudes towards its practice (Waniganayake et al., 2012).

Tayler (2000) implies that moving out of traditional conceptions of early childhood professionals as nice ladies can facilitate practice of advocacy. Alternatively, Grieshaber (2001) proposes that the understanding of multiple identities can facilitate the enactment of both roles as nurturers and advocates that are both crucial to the care and education of young children. Evidence from research indicates that the discourse of niceness still dominates the early childhood sector today. Educators are reluctant to take on their role as advocates because it implies standing out as extreme activists, which is contrary to the supposed caring, nurturing and nice image that needs to be portrayed (Couse & Russo, 2006; Liebovich & Adler, 2009; Mevawalla, 2009; Stegeline & Hartle, 2003). The discourse of niceness limits the access of power and hinders participation in activist-type activities because educators are unwilling to be viewed as unprofessional (Covington Soul, 2008; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012).

Constructions of professionalism contribute to the hesitancy of early childhood educators to affiliate with advocacy, specifically at the systems level. Woodrow (2007) identifies training institutions to play an important role in the construction of early childhood professionalism that can support and promote the practice of systems advocacy. Exploring the role of teacher education programs in encouraging the development of early childhood educators as advocates may be the initial step needed to facilitate the involvement of the educators in the political arena.

### **Can advocacy be developed through teacher education programs?**

In the United States, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2012) standards for initial and advanced early childhood professional

preparation programs clearly identifies advocacy as a part of Standard 6: Becoming a Professional. Element 6e requires teacher education programs to prepare students to engage “in informed advocacy for young children and the early childhood profession” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2012, pp. 39, 94). In Australia, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2012) criteria used to accredit early childhood teacher education programs also includes advocacy as a curriculum requirement under early childhood professional practice. These documents suggest that advocacy is a core component of teachers' professional practice and that teacher education programs play an important role in developing early childhood advocates.

Advocacy training in pre-service teacher education programs has the potential to lay the foundation and build a sense of commitment to advocate for change through an understanding of issues beyond the classroom and how they affect children, families and the profession (Brunson, 2002). Teacher education programs must impart the knowledge base, build the skills and develop the confidence and dispositions for early childhood educators to be strong and effective advocates (Davey, 2000; Ebbeck, 1990; Jensen, 2004; Lombardi, 1986). It is important that there is integration of theory and practical experiences, which can be achieved with advocacy being weaved in throughout the whole program (Brunson, 2002; Covington Soul, 2008; Davey, 2000; Liebovich & Adler, 2009; Lombardi, 1986; Stegeline & Hartle, 2003).

Researchers have reported on a number of effective strategies used in teacher education programs that facilitate the development of early childhood advocates. First, Covington Soul (2008) emphasises that terms such as power, advocacy and

activism must be explicitly included to enable students to engage in issues and identify themselves as powerful agents of change. Second, advocacy assignments and projects are regarded as providing opportunities for students to engage in advocacy activities that can develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to advocate (Davey, 2000; Dever, 2006). Third, collaborative activities can create spaces for building comfortable and trusting relationships where students can share experiences and engage in critical discussions about issues that warrant advocacy (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Liebovich & Adler, 2009). Fourth, field experiences such as internships and immersion in community projects enhanced concepts discussed in the classroom and provide meaningful experiences that made advocacy concrete to participants (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Swadener, 2003). These service-learning projects provide opportunities for authentic and active involvement in community-based experiences, allow for individualised growth and development, and become mutually beneficial to the learning of the student and the service provided (Castle & Ethridge, 2003; Couse & Russo, 2006). A notable article from Australia by Woodrow and Busch (2008) describes a project that required pre-service students to participate in a community-wide activity that required forming partnerships with different stakeholders. Immersion in the community project allowed for critical thinking about the dominant discourses of professionalism and leadership and developing skills for activism (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Scholars and researchers (such as Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Catapano, 2006; Couse & Russo, 2006; Dever, 2006) highlight the benefits of incorporating various strategies that allow opportunities for pre-service educators to experience advocacy in action within teacher education programs.



While there are benefits to including advocacy instruction in undergraduate programs, one may question its relevance to a beginning teacher. Liebovich (2005) points out that although students envisioned advocacy in their future careers, it may still be too big a concept to apply at beginning stages of their careers. Advocacy is also considered to be an individual journey that develops at a different pace for each person (Liebovich & Adler, 2009). Furthermore, advocacy in the political arena often grows from work at the program or community level; thus early childhood educators may start working at the micro level and then build confidence and skills to be comfortable to do political advocacy (Kieff, 2009). It is suggested that training may be irrelevant until educators actually begin to mature and experience advocacy in the field (Brunson, 2002; Liebovich & Adler, 2009). These points therefore question the value of advocacy instruction to a wider range of students in pre-service programs, particularly at the undergraduate level. Additionally, there are several more challenges that need to be overcome for teacher education programs to be successful in developing early childhood advocates.

#### *The challenges for teacher education programs*

The regulatory environment in Australia and internationally not only impacts early childhood settings but also influences teacher education programs. It pressures the programs to be constructed as technical and subject matter oriented such that it excludes content on advocacy, social policy and economic agendas (Brunson, 2002; Jensen, 2004; Stegelin & Hartle, 2003; Wong, 2007; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). A survey conducted with early childhood academics in the United States revealed that advocacy and social policy are perceived to be of lower importance than other

course content that are regarded as more critical to preparing early childhood educators for work in the field (Brunson, 2002; Stegelin & Hartle, 2003). This finding was also evident from the studies of Brunson (2002) and Stegelin and Hartle (2003) that both aimed to evaluate the advocacy content of teacher education programs across the United States. According to academics who were the respondents of these surveys, there is a lack of subjects entirely dedicated to advocacy. Advocacy lacked in-depth discussion and prolonged investigation (Brunson, 2002; Liebovich, 2005). These findings contradict the positive effects that strategies such as advocacy projects and service-learning methods have on developing early childhood advocates that are described mostly in the conceptual literature.

### **The need for further research on advocacy in teacher education programs**

It is important to note that much of the literature and research on the impact of teacher education programs as a means for developing the skills, knowledge and dispositions for advocacy comes largely from the United States. Furthermore, most of the extant research on the approaches to advocacy instruction has been atheoretical.

In Australia, empirical research is limited to the perceptions of early childhood educators on advocacy (see Mevawalla, 2009; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012) and the influences on policy-making (see Bown, 2013; Fraser, 2000). Although the role of teacher education programs in the development of early childhood educators as advocates has been strongly suggested in conceptual literature, empirical research exploring the impact of teacher education programs has yet to be undertaken. Woodrow and Busch (2008) also identify pre-service teacher education as a site of

development of new discourses of teacher professionalism. There is a need, therefore, to investigate teacher education programs in Australia and its constructions of teacher professionalism that may in turn support and promote advocacy the practice of systems advocacy.



### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter justifies and outlines the research methods used to investigate how teacher education programs in Australia support and promote systems advocacy through constructions of teacher professionalism. The chapter begins with a discussion on the constructivist research paradigm to provide a justification for the research design used. The research methods are then outlined in detail, including how the sampling, participant recruitment and selection and data collection processes were undertaken. The thematic data analysis process is also elaborated to ensure transparency of the phases that were followed in analysing the qualitative data gathered for the study.

#### **Research paradigm**

Hatch (2002) strongly suggests that research and inquiry should begin with “struggling with paradigm issues, exploring assumptions, and coming to grips with the differences in worldviews and what they mean for doing research” (p. 12). For this particular research, the constructivist paradigm is what best describes my approach to knowledge and justifies my chosen research methods.

For constructivists, the nature of reality (ontology) is context dependent, making knowledge exist in multiple realities. For example, as discussed in Chapter One, professionalism is considered to be socially constructed and thus is understood differently from different perspectives. Similarly, as outlined in Chapter Two, exposure and affiliation with particular constructs of professionalism can influence educators’ views about and undertaking of systems advocacy. Constructivism

therefore emphasises the “inherently unique” views “constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage point” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15).

Consequently, the knowledge that can be obtained (epistemology) within the constructivist paradigm is not objective and factual. Rather, it is individual perspectives that need to be explored and understood (Hatch, 2002). Research conducted within this paradigm thus acknowledges multiple meanings and aims to unlock complexity by relying on participant’s views on the area being explored (Creswell, 2007).

In line with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the constructivist research paradigm, this study sought to explore early childhood academics’ perspectives about the incorporation of systems advocacy in early childhood teacher education programs, and where those perspectives have come from. It is fitting, therefore, that qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyse data (Hatch, 2002). The in-depth interviews conducted with participants allowed for an understanding of advocacy content within teacher education programs from the perspective of early childhood academics, through the lens of teacher professionalism.

### **Research design**

Qualitative, semi-structured one-off interviews were undertaken with early childhood academics to investigate their perceptions of the incorporation of systems advocacy in undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs, the development of early childhood teachers as advocates, and the opportunities and constraints for the inclusion of advocacy content in undergraduate teacher

education programs in New South Wales. Ethics approval was obtained from Macquarie University's Human Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee, ethics approval 5201400409 (Appendix 1).

### *Sampling*

#### *Web-based search*

To identify potential participants, a web search was conducted for universities in New South Wales that offered undergraduate programs in early childhood education. The search was confined to undergraduate programs in this one Australian state given the limited time and resources available to conduct the study. The search identified eight universities that offered early childhood degrees such as Bachelor of Education (Birth to Twelve Years) or Bachelor of Teaching (Birth to Five Years). Each of the program's university websites was used to identify units that could be included in the study. Unit titles and descriptions were assessed using the following inclusion criteria:

- a. Courses offered in the third or fourth year
- b. Course titles indicated relevant content such as advocacy, policy, leadership, ethics
- c. Course descriptions had a strong advocacy or policy focus
- d. Policy discussed as something that can be influenced, rather than familiarisation with policy context or policy at the centre level
- e. Leadership discussed in relation to or influencing advocacy in the sector

- f. Leadership rather than management focus
- g. Course descriptions included the development of leadership skills
- h. Course descriptions implied critical reflection and review of policy or issues in EC sector

Eleven units representing nine undergraduate early childhood programs from seven universities were identified from these criteria.

#### *Participant selection and recruitment*

Program coordinators from the identified seven universities were then contacted to obtain the contact details of the particular academics that convened each of the eleven units. This process resulted in a purposive sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2010) of eleven early childhood academics who convened the eleven potential units that had advocacy content. Correspondence with these academics was initially made via email (see Appendix 2) to confirm the appropriateness of their particular unit for inclusion in the study.

The initial email explained the purpose of the study and served as an invitation for each unit convenor to participate in the study. Seven academics from five universities expressed interest in participating and were emailed information and consent forms (see Appendix 3). These forms were completed and returned before data collection. Seven of the 11 convenors were interviewed, constituting a sample that represents 64% of the advocacy units in undergraduate programs across New South Wales.



### *Data collection*

The first source of data was the unit outlines provided by the participants for each of their respective units. These were obtained from the participants for two main purposes:

1. To provide the researcher with the opportunity to familiarise herself with each unit prior to interviewing each participant; and
2. To review content that, in conjunction with interview data, was used to determine the extent to which each unit included a focus on advocacy (as per Table 4, to be discussed in Chapter Four).

The unit outlines were therefore used to contextualise and assist the researcher's preparation for the interviews, rather than as data to be included for analysis.

The second source of data was obtained using a semi-structured interview approach, or what Johnson and Christensen (2010) refer to as the interview guide approach. These semi-structured interviews were used to explore early childhood academics' perceptions of the incorporation of advocacy in early childhood teacher education programs. Participants were provided with an interview schedule (see Appendix 4) that included questions that would obtain their perspectives on

- a. The relevance of their particular unit to preparing early childhood educators to become advocates in the sector;
- b. The content that their unit provided on advocacy and how it addressed the development of advocacy knowledge, skills and dispositions;

- c. The opportunities and constraints for including advocacy content in early childhood teacher education programs.

Using an interview schedule enables the interviewer to “cover the same general topics and questions with all of the interviewees” (Johnson & Christensen, 2010, p. 203), which provides consistency for the data obtained across all participants. Additionally, the semi-structured nature of the interview allows for the flexibility of interactions between the interviewer and interviewee (Hatch, 2002).

Initial interview questions aimed to obtain background information on the seven participants and an overview of the units they convened that were relevant to this study. As can be seen from Table 2, participants varied in their academic position and experience, as well as in their professional work backgrounds. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the anonymity of participants.

Table 2. Participant profiles

<b>Academic</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Years in Position</b>	<b>Background/Previous Roles</b>
Ella	Lecturer	9 years	Teaching and directing roles in early childhood settings TAFE [access and equity courses] Roles in boards and committees supporting services in early childhood sector
Hanna	Senior Lecturer	2.5 years	Teaching in early childhood settings Assistant Professor overseas
Audrey	Lecturer B	6 years	Teaching and directing roles in early childhood settings Tertiary sector for 10 years
Will	Casual/Part-time Lecturer	3 years	Teaching and directing roles in early childhood settings Freelance consultancy
Joanne	Senior Lecturer	2 years	Lecturer for 9 years Social and community development work
Heather	Associate Professor	16 years	Preschool advisor in local government

			Involved in developing units at university
Natasha	Lecturer	14 years	Senior policy officer in state government University Union president

An overview of the units included is provided in Table 3. This Table shows that all units are core units that have a leadership focus, and are taken during students' third or fourth year. The units are generally delivered externally and/or internally as part of birth to twelve or birth to five programs.

Table 3. Unit overview

Unit	Program	Year Taken	Mode
EC Leadership (Ella)	Birth to Five Years	Fourth year, core	Distance, online
Leadership, Advocacy, Admin (Hanna)	Birth to Twelve	Fourth year, core	Mixed
Leadership and Advocacy (Audrey)	Birth to Twelve	Third/Fourth year, core	External with three intensive half-day workshops
Leadership and Management 2 (Will)	Birth to Five Birth to Twelve	Fourth year, core	Mixed
Leadership and Management 1 (Joanne)	Birth to Five Birth to Twelve	Third year, core	Mixed
Leadership Theory (Heather)	Birth to Twelve	Third/Fourth year, core	Distance, online
Human Leadership (Natasha)	Birth to Twelve	Third/Fourth year, core	Distance, online

Interviews ranged from 35 – 60 minutes in duration. Six interviews were conducted over the phone; a convenient arrangement given the time constraints and varying participant locations. One interview was conducted in the participant's workplace. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking (Johnson &

Christensen, 2010) to enhance the credibility of the data. The process produced only minor changes to the transcripts.

### *Data analysis*

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify themes and patterns from the interview data. Following the phases of analysis outlined in Chapter Two, this section outlines how each phase was applied specifically to the interview data obtained from this study.

Phase one of analysis involved familiarisation with the data, which Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest begins while transcribing verbal data. Since the recorded interviews were not transcribed by the researcher, familiarisation with the already transcribed data was achieved when the transcripts were checked for accuracy while listening to the recorded interviews for de-identification and member checking. Initial ideas about possible codes and groups were also noted down to facilitate the next phase of data analysis.

Phase two of analysis was the formal coding process, which was conducted using the data analyses software QSR NVivo 10. The first part of this phase required setting up of initial codes using the interview schedule as a guide. These codes included:

- a. The unit
- b. Barriers to inclusion of advocacy
- c. Facilitators to inclusion of advocacy
- d. Unit convenor's personal views

#### e. Professionalism

Within each broad code, sub codes were developed that were more specific to what the data extracts talked about. For example, the broad code 'facilitators' was developed to include the sub codes 'using current issues', 'talking about it in the context of professionalism', 'talking about different ways of practicing advocacy', 'involving professional organisations', 'included in program goals and topics', and 'framing that daily practice is a form of advocacy'.

The second part of this phase involved extracting the data into those initial codes and sub codes. All data was extracted with surrounding questions or statements to contextualise each excerpt (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A summary table of initial codes and sub codes, including the number of sources and excerpts gathered for each is provided in Appendix 5.

After going through the seven interviews and coding them accordingly, a report that contained all data excerpts for each code was exported as a PDF file. This process yielded 45 separate PDF files that represented each of the emergent codes and sub codes. One example of these extracted files is provided in Appendix 6 to illustrate excerpts under the sub code 'talking about different ways of practicing advocacy'.

Phase three involved identifying preliminary themes from the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To this end, the codes and sub codes drawn from Appendix 5 were first grouped according to how they addressed each of the research questions. Appendix 7 shows an example of the initial mapping of the codes. Grouping of the codes in this manner allowed for preliminary relationships between the codes and

themes across the data to be identified. All the data excerpts for each of the research questions were collated to facilitate the next phase of data analysis.

Phase four involved the review and refinement of initial themes by re-reading the data set to establish that it accurately reflected the themes that were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data extracts coded under each of the research questions were reviewed to establish if there was enough data to support the telling of a story for each theme. After re-reading of the extracts, the initial themes were revised to create a more refined thematic map. An example of the thematic map illustrating themes under Research Question 3 is provided in Appendix 8.

Further examination of the data led to the next phase of the analysis process. Phase five as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) involved defining and naming themes. Preliminary themes from the previous example (under 'opportunities' and 'constraints') were analysed through the theoretical lens of teacher professionalism. This analysis revealed that the opportunities and constraints could be grouped into different constructions of professionalism. Three emerging themes were therefore identified as the constructions of professionalism that influence the incorporation of advocacy in teacher education programs: external accrediting bodies' constructions of professionalism, pre-service teachers' constructions of professionalism and academics' constructions of professionalism. A structure was determined to enable a coherent and consistent reporting of the data within and across each of the themes. The data excerpts were arranged to answer three questions under each construction of professionalism (themes):

- a. What construction did this stakeholder group hold?

- b. What are the implications of these constructions on the professional identity and responsibilities of early childhood teachers?
- c. What are the implications of these constructions on teacher education programs' inclusion of advocacy?

Braun and Clarke (2006) encourage the moving back and forth through the various phases of the thematic analysis process as needed. In this vein, re-reading and recoding the data as arranged under the three questions per theme (see Appendix 9) allowed for further refinement of the thematic map. For example, further examination of data under the theme 'pre-service teachers' constructions of professionalism' provided scope for the ideas to be divided into sub themes: 'teachers should be working with children in the classroom' and 'professionalism can be developed and changes over time'. Each sub theme was highlighted by data excerpts to substantiate the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis. The thematic map developed from this process is shown in Appendix 10.

The process of thematic analysis ends with the writing of a report that provides a convincing argument in relation to the research questions. This argument should be illustrated by a carefully selected range of quotes from the data that are organised to tell a coherent story (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This coherent story and argument is presented in the next chapter of this thesis.





## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This chapter answers each of the study's three research questions from the perspective of the participating seven early childhood academics. The chapter is divided into three sections, each corresponding to one specific research question. The first section argues that although a web search appears to show that the majority of undergraduate programs have a focus on advocacy, the qualitative data reveal that systems advocacy is incorporated into the units to varying degrees, from extensive to a very limited extent. The next section illustrates that while particular units aim to develop knowledge, skills and dispositions, it is done in different ways and with different emphases. The final section of this chapter proposes that three sets of views around teacher professionalism present opportunities and constraints to the inclusion of advocacy in undergraduate programs.

### **Research Question 1**

**To what extent do undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs in New South Wales incorporate a focus on systems advocacy?**

Eight universities in New South Wales were identified through a web search (see Chapter Three) to have undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs. Of these, programs from seven universities (87%) were identified as including a total of 11 units that focused on advocacy. This finding suggests that an overwhelming majority of early childhood programs have units that focus on advocacy. Analysis of the data generated from interviews with the seven participating unit convenors, however, suggested otherwise, with systems

advocacy in particular generally incorporated to a very limited extent. The interviews with the academics were, therefore, critical to exploring the practice of each unit's focus on systems advocacy.

All seven units incorporate advocacy in some way. Collectively, the units provide a definition of advocacy and activism, discuss that it can be enacted at different levels and in different ways, and that advocacy is (or can be) part of an early childhood teacher's or leader's professional responsibilities. An overview of each unit's advocacy content is provided in Table 4:

Table 4. Advocacy content in sample units

Unit Convenor	Advocacy Content
Ella	1 out of 12 modules
Hanna	3 out of 11 modules
Audrey	2 out of 10 topics
Will	2 out of 10 topics
Joanne	Weaved throughout the unit
Heather	Limited to examples from leaders interviewed by students for leadership assignment; dependent on online sharing
Natasha	1 out of 9 topics

Table 4 demonstrates that each participant incorporates advocacy in their units to varying degrees. Some participants, notably Joanne, Hanna, Audrey and Will, do it more extensively, while others such as Ella and Natasha do so to a limited extent. Heather incorporates advocacy in a more unintentional or indirect manner:

*"I think it's [the unit is] probably more [about] leaders and managers and being an advocate in what any of the particular topics are is probably more unsaid, unwritten." (Heather, transcript, p. 13)*

Six of the seven participants indicated that systems advocacy is incorporated in their units, while the remaining one (Natasha) specifically said that there is no focus on systems advocacy at all. Five participants (Joanne, Hanna, Ella, Audrey and Will) had a stronger focus on systems advocacy, with their units intentionally emphasising the critical role teachers can play in the political sphere:

*"I think activism and advocacy need to be very apparent in the undergraduate program to arm our students with the knowledge that, well we do need to stand up and be heard." (Audrey, transcript, p. 5, 7)*

*"The message there is that it's not just about you being passive recipients of social policy or legislation. It's about you actively engaging with them and applying them in ways that are in the best interests of children." (Joanne, transcript, p. 3)*

Despite this focus on systems advocacy, five academics (Ella, Audrey, Joanne, Heather, and Natasha) highlighted that advocacy is a large topic area. As such, there is limited capacity to explore advocacy in depth, particularly as advocacy is just one part of a larger unit:

*"We talk about personal, centre, community and systems level. At all those levels, and in a way it's a bit sad because that's just a component of the advocacy component of the unit. So we really need to talk about quite a few things, like advocacy and activism being a professional and ethical responsibility. We talk about the differences between advocacy and activism. Then we talk about activism and advocacy on an international level as well. We scratch the surface, unfortunately we don't go very, very deeply." (Audrey, transcript, p. 5)*

Three of these five participants (Ella, Audrey and Joanne) suggested that perhaps having another unit entirely devoted to advocacy would allow for more exploration of systems advocacy:

*"I would honestly say that while we endeavour to do that, we don't do it in the depth that we would if we had an entire subject devoted to advocacy because it's part of a subject." (Ella, transcript, p. 11)*

## **Research Question 2**

**Do particular units aim to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions for early childhood teachers to be strong and effective advocates in and for the sector?**

The learning and teaching activities incorporated in all of the units aim to collectively develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions of early childhood advocates. Common activities and resources used included texts, case studies, journal articles, videos and media pieces on advocacy and current early childhood policy issues that generated online discussions and reflective blogs about advocacy in ECE. Students in Heather's unit are tasked to explore leadership in action as they undergo their 5-day professional experience and observe where advocacy might take place. Another unit (Audrey) asks students to investigate and report on an early childhood organisation that advocates for young children, families and early childhood educators to familiarise themselves with these organisations and the advocacy process.

All participants noted that their units focused on building advocacy knowledge. This knowledge base included:

1. General advocacy topics (such as definitions and levels of advocacy as noted earlier).
2. The context in which advocacy takes place and organisations that advocate for children, families, and the early childhood profession.
3. Awareness of the current climate and the socio-political context of early childhood in Australia: policies, regulations, and legislation such as the National Quality Framework, and current issues in early childhood that warrant advocacy.

When skills were discussed in the interviews, all participants agreed that there was no scope to develop generalist advocacy skills such as writing letters and submissions or communicating with the media. Three participants (Audrey, Heather and Natasha) reported that their units did not target developing skills related to advocacy, for example:

*"...we are quite forceful in saying that we need to be strong advocates... But I don't think the unit gives the students the skills to do so. I think I need to work on that." (Audrey, transcript, p. 6-7)*

For four of the participants (Ella, Hanna, Will and Joanne) the development of advocacy skills is focused on critical thinking. These academics used the knowledge base to engage students in developing critical thinking as a key advocacy skill. Critical thinking skills involved analysing, engaging and questioning policies from a social justice perspective and considering how policies may or may not be in the interests of children and/or the early childhood profession:

*"What does that mean? Social justice for whom? From whose perspective? Whose voice is not presented or being muted in a way?"*

*... I really want to have them become critical thinkers. So really pause and think and ask questions when they read for example an announcement about something. Or when they read some policy text, I want them to stop and think who is missing and who is presented? So that's my aims and goals that I hope for the course."*  
(Hanna, transcript, p. 11)

Participants varied in what they regarded their unit should target first, that is, whether advocacy dispositions needed to be built before knowledge and skills could be developed. One group of participants (Audrey, Heather and Natasha) suggested that their units primarily focus on building an advocacy disposition first. These participants shared a common definition of an advocacy disposition as being aware of your own values and beliefs in order to know what you are advocating for and the reasons behind it:

*"If people don't know who they are and understand what they're doing and why they're doing it and they're working from what they value and believe about children and early childhood education and staff and of our families, then it makes it very difficult for them to put into daily practice what is, without even saying it, they're being an advocate for children in terms of what kind of an educator they are or what kind of a director they are."* (Heather, transcript, p. 10)

Two participants in this group, Heather and Natasha, stated that their units emphasise the importance of building an advocacy disposition before delving into skills:

*"...my approach is largely about awareness and part of it is understanding that's largely about your values and your beliefs. So the approach I'd take is to develop values and beliefs and the skills can come later. Anybody can learn them. So that's why it is what it*

*is. It's about actually philosophically understanding... that image of child, image of worker... So that's my intention in that brief period..." (Natasha, transcript, p. 15)*

For the second group of participants (Ella, Hanna, Will and Joanne), the development of critical thinking skills was viewed as having the leverage to develop an advocacy disposition. These participants viewed the development of critical thinking skills as the means to enable an advocacy disposition and the possibility for advocacy and action in the future:

*"I guess what we want to encourage students to do is to be critical and reflective in their thinking about things so that they're not necessarily taking things at face value and they are thinking about what the implications of policy might be, and not necessarily just going oh well, someone said this is a good policy, so it must be good. We want them to really think about what does this mean in practice; but also then thinking about the wider implications as well and how that might affect them and what they might do in response to that... I guess we have to work with it at the moment, but is it an ideal policy? Could it be changed? Could it be done differently?" (Will, transcript, p. 10-11)*

An advocacy disposition for this second group of academics refers to the capacity to imagine how things can be done differently to promote the best interests of children, families, early childhood educators, and the early childhood profession. According to Joanne, developing the disposition to advocate begins from critical analysis and engagement with policies:

*"It's trying to get them to have ownership and to see the need themselves and to value that [advocacy] themselves and so by critiquing policy and highlighting a sort of scope for how children's*

*interests and wellbeing could be better promoted and how the professional status of teachers could be better promoted.” (Joanne, transcript, p. 9)*

Developing the disposition then becomes a cyclical process, wherein the building of skills and dispositions is sometimes blurred as expressed in this quote:

*“What we try and weave in across each of those topics is building a disposition in our graduates to critically analyse the political context and to advocate for children and the profession.” (Joanne, transcript, p. 8)*

Notably, with the exception of Ella, this group of participants incorporated advocacy into their units more extensively (based on Table 4) than the first group of participants. They did this by using an approach that focused on building a knowledge and critical thinking skills base to develop an advocacy disposition.

### **Research Question 3**

**What are the opportunities and constraints for the inclusion of systems advocacy content in undergraduate teacher education programs in NSW?**

Thematic analysis of the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) uncovered a number of opportunities and constraints for the inclusion of systems advocacy in the undergraduate teacher education programs focused on in this study. It revealed that the extent to which systems advocacy is included and the focus on knowledge, skills and/or dispositions appears to be influenced by three sets of views around teacher professionalism: external accrediting bodies, pre-service teachers, and academics.



## **External accrediting bodies' constructions of professionalism**

*Content in teacher education programs are largely determined by external forces*

For four participants (Ella, Joanne, Heather and Natasha), a limitation to including more advocacy content in ECE programs was their perception that course content is largely determined by what accrediting bodies deem teacher professionals need to know. Undergraduate programs in New South Wales need to meet the accreditation requirements of one (Birth to Five) if not two (Birth to Twelve) government accrediting bodies, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES). Natasha speaks authoritatively about this matter because of her experience in determining course content of some programs within her university:

*"So the battle is that we don't get to determine to a large extent what goes in our courses. A lot of that is prescribed for us by the accrediting bodies and they keep chopping and changing their minds about that." (Natasha, transcript, p. 16)*

Even when individual academics or entire departments want to make room for advocacy in their programs, what is prioritised is the need to meet requirements of accrediting bodies. For example, Joanne notes that:

*"...we have, as one of our core values, social justice but I'm afraid unfortunately I feel that it's pretty token. I think social justice might be mentioned in a unit here or there but it's not a strong message. It's not a strong underpinning of our program and I think that's because we have had to meet these external requirements for the Institute of Teachers so that our programs are accredited. I think*

*our philosophy and our core value of social justice have got lost.”*

*(Joanne, transcript, p. 13)*

The lack of focus on social justice has implications for the inclusion of advocacy in undergraduate programs as advocacy is underpinned by principles of social justice.

From the perspective of these participating academics, constraints presented by accrediting bodies such as ACECQA and BOSTES have meant shifting priorities to required content. This shift has led to a compromising of preferred curriculum and philosophy, which in turn have impacted on the incorporation of advocacy in their respective units.

*There's just too much content to cover*

Challenges are also present with many ECE programs in New South Wales recently moving from a Birth to Eight to a Birth to Twelve focus. This broadening of curriculum resulted from changed accreditation requirements, where to be eligible to teach in a primary school in New South Wales, graduates now needed to have completed a program of study that covered all primary years of schooling. This broader focus has meant that program content needs to extend well beyond the internationally accepted early years of birth to eight (OECD, 2006) to birth to twelve. As noted earlier in Chapter Three, six of the seven units included in this study are part of a Birth to Twelve undergraduate program. Heather reported that there is limited scope to include content such as advocacy because it forms only a small part of the program:

*“I think we're pretty full in terms of everything that we have to have... and we have a new four-year undergraduate [program] that's half early childhood, half primary. So we've been looking at*

*the ACECQA guidelines... When you look at the spread of all of those things that are again the broad guide, even ideas of the leadership management and provision of policies and those things is a very small part of all of those six broad elements with all their little subheadings and subsections.” (Heather, transcript, p. 16)*

Six of the seven participants also emphasised that the amount of content that needs to be covered within the entire program limits their capacity to include topics such as advocacy within their units. Although they try to cover as much advocacy content as possible, these academics recognise that the breadth of content presents as a substantial barrier:

*“I think the fact that our programs now are birth to 12 is a huge problem because there's a crowding of curriculum and we can only do so much... the breadth is enormous.” (Joanne, transcript, p. 13)*

*“I'm not sure whether it's because so many other things would have to be covered that - whether this gets a bit - it's squeezed out.” (Will, transcript, p. 15)*

In this section, participants' comments suggest that advocacy, and thus systems advocacy, does not appear to be regarded by accrediting bodies as critical to the knowledge and skill base of an early childhood teaching professional. It would therefore follow that advocacy is not regarded as a professional responsibility of teachers. This approach seemingly privileges a view of teacher professionalism as being confined to the classroom.

## **Pre-service teachers' constructions of professionalism**

*Teachers should be working with children in the classroom*

All seven participants shared the view that pre-service teachers consider their primary role to be working with children in the classroom and within their own centres. This view poses a barrier because confining the early childhood teacher's role to the classroom limits their capacity to imagine a role beyond their centres. One participant suggested that for pre-service teachers:

*"...teaching is what they experienced as a child; so it's within the classroom. It's about curriculum and it's about children's learning."  
(Will, transcript, p. 11)*

Students were perceived by all participants to be concerned about their own professional development as teachers, wanting to learn knowledge and skills that can be used in the classroom such as child development, curriculum planning and documentation, pedagogical and reflective practice, and classroom management. Accordingly, students were perceived to have little or no interest in early childhood policy or advocacy:

*"Many students don't understand the need to critique policy. They come in and they just want to know what they need to do and they have almost a blind faith in government. Many students seem to... find the notion of critique quite difficult because they're not used to critiquing and it's almost like we just want to teach children in our centres and in our classrooms." (Joanne, transcript, p. 8-9)*

Moreover, concentrating on their responsibilities of teaching and caring for children within centres was perceived by five of the participants (Ella, Will, Joanne,

Heather and Natasha) to limit pre-service teachers' views about advocacy as a core part of an early childhood teacher's role:

*"even ideas around individual children and families and the focus on the individual rather than the community... I think that idea that the work of early childhood educators is with the children and that it might be more confined to the micro level of the personal and the service rather than the macro level or in the political sphere." (Ella, transcript, p. 15)*

The challenge, as Ella noted, is to provide a broad understanding that while the early childhood professional has a role to play within the micro-context with children and families, it extends to the macro-context "beyond the immediate daily experience of educators and has more to do with the political sphere" (Ella, transcript, p. 9).

*A student centred emergent curriculum is not conducive to a focus on advocacy*

Two participants (Heather and Natasha) considered their use of a student centred approach as a constraint to including advocacy in a more in-depth manner. While these participants introduced the broad leadership concepts and subject areas, the student-centred focus of their programs influenced them to follow their students' interests, which as noted above, tends to exclude advocacy. These participants emphasised that although students thought about advocacy and social justice as relevant topics, other issues that are more concrete and reflective of their experiences as teachers take precedence:

*"I think it's probably more a degree rather than they don't see it as relevant. I don't think you can say to any of them do you think social justice and advocacy is relevant or not, they'd all say yes."*

*I think it's just more relevant, it's more real to them... they're more focused on problems – they all work, most of our students work. There's always a smattering that selects social justice and advocacy but it's always only a smattering.” (Natasha, transcript, p. 10-11)*

The incorporation of advocacy within these units becomes limited to issues that are raised from the interest of students. Since advocacy is not considered to be a core part of the teacher's role, it is not discussed in-depth, and can get squeezed out because of the other topics deemed by students to be more relevant to becoming an early childhood professional.

*Professionalism can be developed and changes over time*

The idea that pre-service teachers' professional identity can change over time presented as both an opportunity and a barrier to incorporating advocacy content. Five participants (Hanna, Will, Joanne, Heather and Natasha) perceived that the construction of professionalism that pre-service teachers bring to their undergraduate studies will change over time; constructions of teacher professionalism are not fixed. The opportunity therefore is to plant the seed and provide opportunities for students to personally see the value of advocacy that they can possibly come back to later on in their careers:

*“I guess we're trying to open their eyes - point out to them that this can be part of the director's role or the leader's role.” (Will, transcript, p. 8)*

The notion that professionalism changes over time also posed a constraint with participants (Hanna, Will and Joanne), also acknowledging their limited capacity, in

light of the external bodies' and pre-service teachers' constructions of teacher professionalism, to inform the students' constructions of professional identity.

As advocacy, particularly at the systems level, cannot be forced, participants (Audrey, Will, Joanne and Heather) encouraged students to begin advocating at a personal and centre level before moving into the wider community and political arena:

*"...with hopefully a view to, okay I would like to do something about it and advocate for children, whether it be at the centre level or whether it be at the broader systems level. I don't push for systems advocacy in the unit even if students start by advocating at the centre level then I'm happy because that's starting to build that disposition." (Joanne, transcript, p. 9)*

Academics, therefore, within early childhood teacher education programs do what they can to develop an advocacy disposition that they can only speculate about being applied when their students are working in the early childhood field.

### **Academics' constructions of professionalism**

*Advocacy is a key professional and ethical role of early childhood professionals*

Six of the seven participants' (Ella, Hanna, Audrey, Joanne, Heather and Natasha) believed that advocacy is a key professional and ethical responsibility of early childhood teachers. This belief appeared to drive these participants to include advocacy in their units, in spite of the constraints faced. These participants aimed to:

*"...say to students, or encourage them to think about advocacy as one of their legitimate and important professional roles." (Joanne, transcript, p. 7)*

The seventh participant, Will however, did not make reference to a belief that advocacy is a key professional responsibility of EC educators. He stressed that students need to see it as a *possible* but not a *necessary* role of all educators and leaders:

*"I think we have to be careful not to say oh, everyone does this, if their reality is I've never seen it - so, I think, in a way, we point to it as something that can be part of the role - and, perhaps, should be part of the role - but I think also recognising the reality that not everyone is going to do it either." (Will, transcript, p. 7)*

As demonstrated above, participants' views about advocacy played a key role in how advocacy was incorporated into their respective units. Their views about advocacy influenced the message that they impart to their students on whether or not advocacy is considered a key role in early childhood teachers' professional practice.

Two participants (Audrey and Joanne) saw the need for early childhood teachers to be more vocal advocates for the field and the profession and to push this agenda further into the political sphere to keep teachers' voices heard. These participants viewed advocacy as a tool for increasing the professional status of the sector and how early childhood educators are viewed by society:

*"I do see it as a professional responsibility of teachers to be active agents in the context that they're working, so that means critically analysing social policy and advocating for the best interests of*



*children and also advocating for the professional status of teachers.” (Joanne, transcript, p. 7)*

Four participants (Ella, Hanna, Audrey and Joanne) particularly viewed advocacy as essential in undergraduate programs because of their belief that students must be able to advocate for themselves as professionals and the children in their care:

*“Children don't have a voice and we need to - not be their voices, but get their voices heard... and it needs to come through with our new very young cohort of educators coming through the university system... I think activism and advocacy need to be very apparent in the undergraduate program to arm our students with the knowledge that, well we do need to be stand up and be heard. It's not a soft approach to a profession and it's very, very important that we get it right. That we have quality early childhood education and care.” (Audrey, transcript, p. 7)*

Despite the constraints faced, values and beliefs held by six participants led them to incorporate advocacy into their respective units, albeit some more intentionally and extensively than others.

#### *Academics' professional philosophies and backgrounds influence incorporation of advocacy*

Five participants (Hanna, Audrey, Joanne, Heather and Natasha) who expressed a strong belief and commitment to social justice were driven by their professional philosophy to incorporate a focus on advocacy, and specifically systems advocacy within their units. Although Joanne and Hanna had initially inherited their units, they revised the unit content and weaved in a stronger focus on advocacy. Natasha, who has experience working with unions and has ran advocacy skills workshops

outside the early childhood field, also emphasised that she chooses to include advocacy as an important aspect of leadership above other numerous aspects of leadership that she could focus on:

*"If you think of human leadership and look what I've got there, there are a lot more areas you could put in, a lot more areas. So I select four aspects and one of them is social responsibility or social justice and advocacy." (Natasha, transcript, p.10)*

Notably, two academics (Joanne and Natasha) have had a professional background in social work and advocacy. This experience also seemingly contributed to their commitment to educating pre-service teachers on the importance of advocacy as a professional responsibility.

Conversely, Will did not seem convinced that advocacy is a necessary part of a teacher's professional role. His background as a former early childhood teacher and centre director appeared to lead him to highlight that although there are leaders who take on an advocacy role, not all early childhood teachers and leaders advocate as part of their professional practice. When asked whether he thought that advocacy can be part of a leader's role but not necessarily a part of a teacher's role, he responded with a practical point of view:

*"I guess, from a practical point of view, yes, that's probably true. I mean whether we think it should be or not - in reality not everyone takes on an advocacy role. I think students are savvy enough that they go on prac and they see a whole range of different services. They work in services themselves, so I think we have to be careful not to say oh, everyone does this, if their reality is I've never seen it - so, I think, in a way, we point to it as something that can be part of the role - and, perhaps, should be part of the role - but I think also*

*recognising the reality that not everyone is going to do it either”  
(Will, transcript, p. 7)*

He added that a teacher does not necessarily have to take on a wider role but can advocate by being a good teacher:

*“I think you can be a very good teacher without necessarily being an advocate; except in the sense that, perhaps, by being a very good teacher, that is in itself a form of advocacy because parents and children are being exposed to what you do and are, perhaps, then going off and talking about it, and in an indirect way it lifts the perception of what teachers do.” (Will, transcript, p. 15)*

In the context of the challenges noted earlier, each of the academics’ professional philosophies becomes critical in how their respective units provide pre-service teachers with particular discourses of professionalism and thus scope to identify and practice as an early childhood advocate. It is also important to how advocacy is incorporated into their units and how they aim to develop pre-service teachers as future advocates in the sector.



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

This study investigated early childhood teacher education programs as constructors of teacher professionalism that supports and promotes the practice of systems advocacy. Chapter Four addressed the research questions of the study through a detailed analysis of units offered in NSW undergraduate programs and of qualitative interview data. These key findings can be summarised in relation to each of the three research questions. Firstly, although a web analysis identified that 87% of undergraduate programs have units that incorporate advocacy, participant interviews revealed that academics incorporated systems advocacy in their units to varying degrees, some more extensively than others. This varying incorporation of systems advocacy can be attributed to multiple prevailing constructions of teacher professionalism, as discussed below. Secondly, participants employed different approaches to building an advocacy disposition. One group of academics focused directly on building dispositions through encouraging students to reflect on their values and beliefs, while the other group aimed to develop critical thinking skills to enable that advocacy disposition. Lastly, there were a number of opportunities and constraints to the incorporation of systems advocacy in teacher education programs. The challenges included the limitations posed by accrediting bodies and the breadth of content in programs, pre-service teachers' views that a teacher's role is primarily in the classroom working with children and the student-centred pedagogical approach used in some units. These challenges were shown to stem from constructions of teacher professionalism held by accrediting bodies and pre-service teachers that excluded or minimised advocacy as a professional responsibility of early childhood teachers.

On the other hand, academics' beliefs that advocacy is part of an early childhood teacher's key professional responsibilities and their commitment to social justice, as demonstrated in their professional philosophies and backgrounds, enabled a stronger focus on advocacy in their units.

### **Significance of the study**

This study makes a number of significant contributions that concur with and extend the existing academic literature and empirical research on advocacy and teacher education programs. This study adds to the very limited research undertaken on systems advocacy. Particularly, it is the first to explore the perspectives of academics in Australia and the role that teacher education programs might play in building a construction of professionalism that incorporates systems advocacy as a professional responsibility.

The embedding of advocacy within the theoretical framework of teacher professionalism is another significant contribution of this study. The examination of advocacy through the lens of teacher professionalism provides explanatory power to the incorporation of systems advocacy in teacher education programs. This is an important contribution given that most of the literature discussed in Chapter Two is descriptive and atheoretical. This study generated findings that, for the first time, talked about a mix of constructions of teacher professionalism from external bodies, pre-service teachers and academics, and how these constructions collectively interact to impact the incorporation of advocacy in undergraduate programs, and therefore, on the notion of advocacy as part of early childhood teachers' professional practice.

As noted in Chapter Two, previous research that explored perspectives on advocacy established that early childhood teachers are reluctant to identify as advocates because they prioritise their responsibilities as being within the classroom and working with children. Participants of this study perceived that pre-service teachers held similar views. Academics identified this as a barrier to discussing advocacy in depth, particularly at a systems level, because students were either not interested in the topic or did not see it as a relevant undertaking as beginning teachers. Furthermore, prior research has also found that teachers' interpretations of being a 'good teacher' involved the implementation of prescribed curriculum and standards and remaining apolitical. Conversely, a majority of the participants in this study viewed the role of the teacher as including but going beyond the classroom, and therefore emphasising the inclusion of advocacy as a key professional responsibility of an early childhood teacher. These opposing views elucidate the notion that professionalism is socially constructed and varies with different contexts and perspectives.

Previous research that relates teacher education programs to the development of early childhood advocates suggests that these programs have the potential to develop an advocacy disposition through the building of an advocacy knowledge and skill base. Another important point from the literature was the emphasis on the importance of integrating practical experiences throughout the whole program that strengthens the development of advocates. These claims are reinforced, opposed and extended by the findings of this study. The participants acknowledged the potential of their particular units to build an advocacy knowledge base and develop an advocacy disposition, however, not all academics

agreed on building skills. This finding concurs with literature that reiterates that there are different strategies and approaches that are employed in advocacy instruction. As noted in Chapter Two, most of this literature is based on the American context. A distinct contribution of this study is that it is an investigation of advocacy in the Australian context.

Additionally, and contrary to the literature, critical thinking and engagement with early childhood policies and issues were skills overwhelmingly mentioned by the participants. This finding contrasted the existing literature that focuses more on generalist advocacy skills such as communication, working with the media and participating in legislative processes. Some participants said that they were intentionally trying to build an advocacy disposition in their pre-service teachers by incorporating a focus on critical thinking skills because they believed that it is a way of building an advocacy disposition. Following from their perception of pre-service teachers coming in with the construction of teacher professionalism that is limited to the classroom, participants recognised the need to support students to critically engage with policies and dominant discourses of early childhood so that students might see that there is a need and scope to practice as early childhood educators beyond the classroom. For this particular group of academics, developing an advocacy disposition starts with building students' knowledge base coupled with opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, which in turn leads to an advocacy disposition. The process is illustrated in the following diagram:





Figure 1. Developing an advocacy disposition

A significant contribution of this study is its theorising of systems advocacy: what it involves and how to develop an advocacy disposition. This approach to advocacy development is focused on here because, as highlighted in Chapter Four, three out of four of this group of participants had a stronger focus on advocacy in their respective units than the other three participants. As outlined in Figure 1, the advocacy knowledge base, which includes awareness of issues and policies in early childhood, stimulates critical thinking as academics encourage and scaffold students to question and reflect on their implications on children, families and the early childhood profession. The knowledge and skills base are used together and lead to the development of an advocacy disposition. As discussed in Chapter Four, developing an advocacy disposition becomes a cyclical process that involves a constant critical engagement with issues and policies. Figure 2 suggests that at first, critical thinking begins as a skill, however, findings of the study suggest that once they are developed, they may become part of a teacher's identity as an early childhood advocate. The process becomes part of the social construction that builds an advocacy disposition of a [systems] advocate, where there is an inherent questioning of early childhood policy and how they impact on children and the profession.

Participants believed that this is the extent to which teacher education programs are able to influence the development of an advocate. The development of practical and generalist advocacy skills that may eventually lead to action were viewed as beyond the scope of their respective units. Placing a boundary on the sphere of influence of teacher education programs (represented in the diagram by the dotted lines) acknowledges that whatever academics are able to develop within that period that they have the students may not necessarily resonate beyond that sphere. This point is once again, consistent with the notion of professionalism as a changing construct.

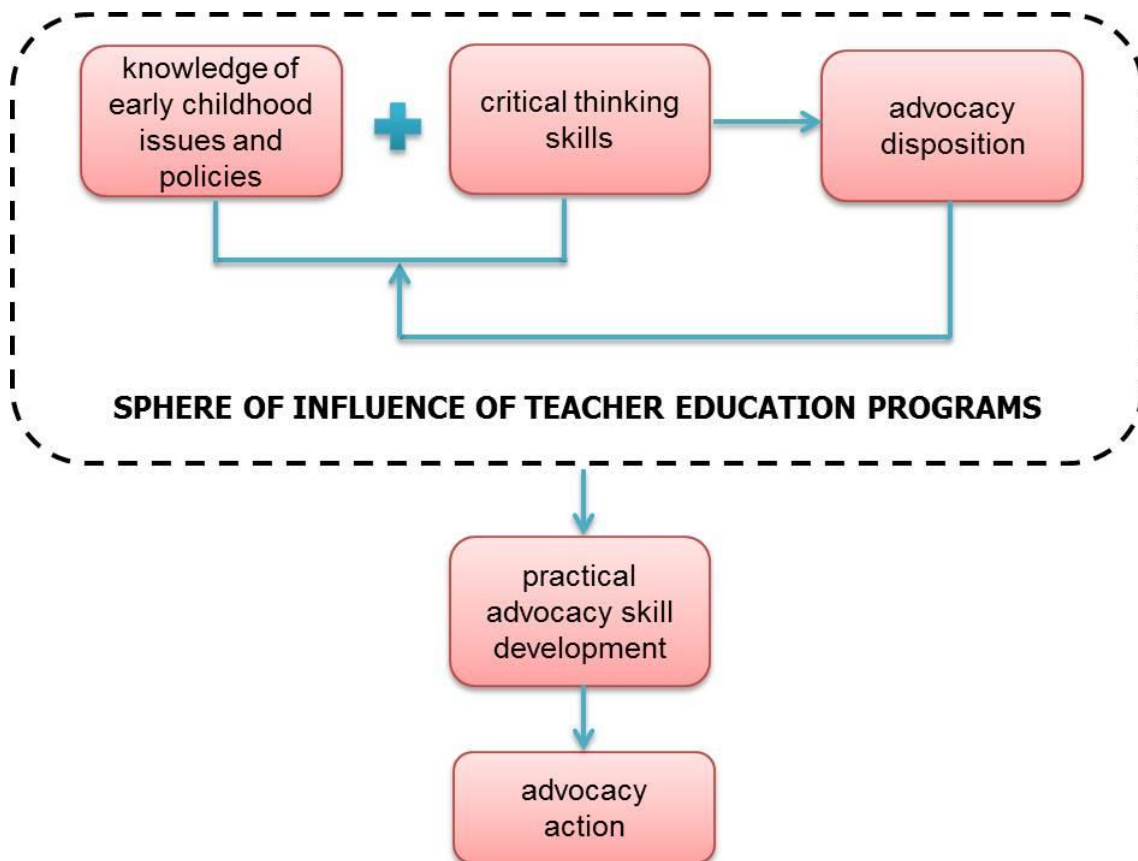


Figure 2. Developing advocacy within teacher education programs

As discussed earlier in this chapter, embedding the lens of teacher professionalism can provide an explanation of this study's findings. In this case, the theoretical

framework explains that the size and scope of the 'sphere of influence' is heavily impacted by multiple constructions of teacher professionalism, from external bodies, from pre-service teachers, and from academics themselves:

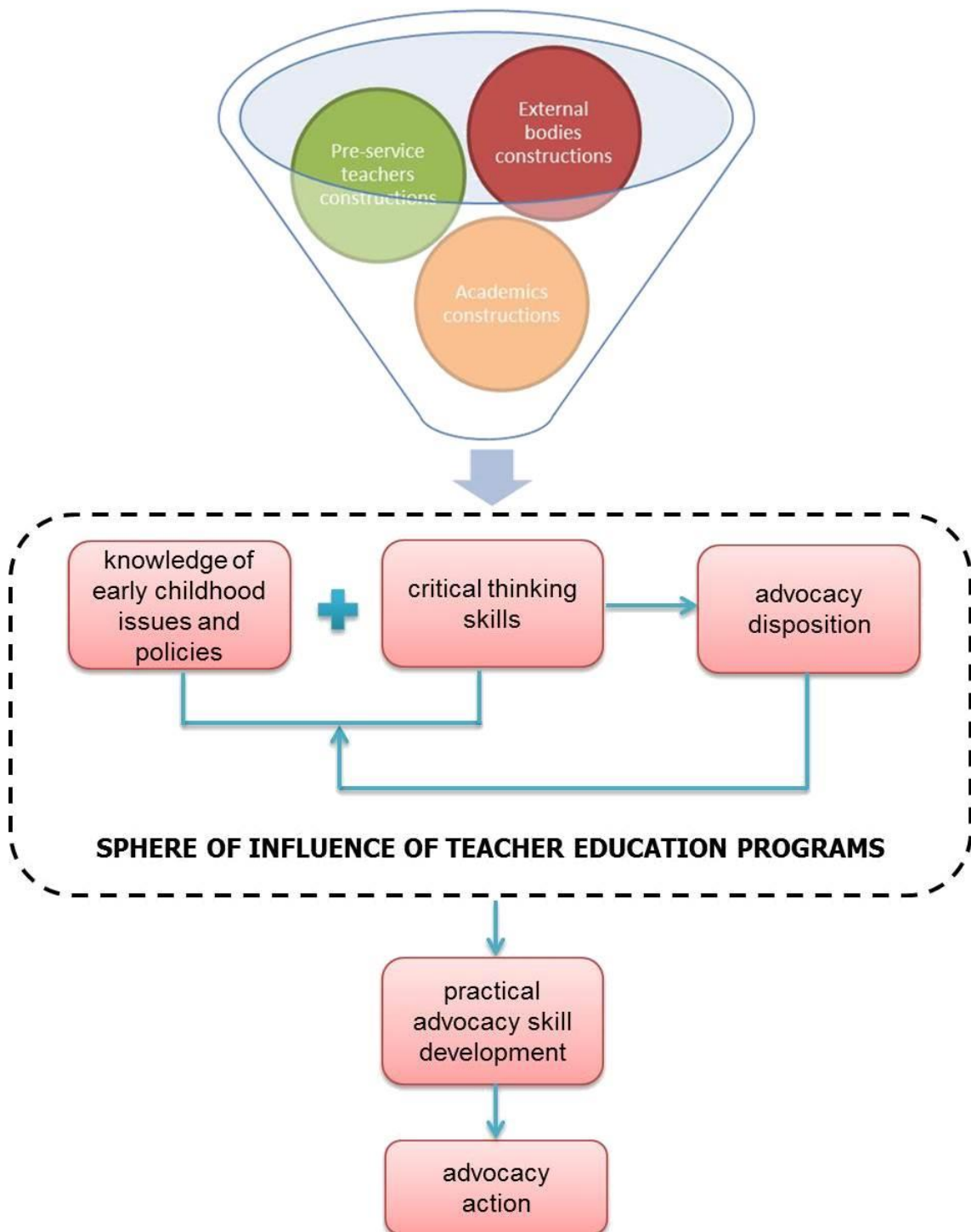


Figure 3. Theoretical framework impacting on the 'sphere of influence'

The three constructions of professionalism (represented by the three balls) interact and go through the funnel in different ways as the impact of each construction will be different for various academics; the different constructions will carry more weight than others. A contrast can be seen, for example, between the participants who use a student-centred approach against those who are more intentional in the incorporation of advocacy in their units. For participants who use a student-centred pedagogical approach, the ball that represents pre-service teachers' constructions is going to be bigger because following students' interests is a priority. On the other hand, for participants who had a strong social justice orientation, the ball that represents their own [academics'] constructions is going to have more weight and their professional beliefs will have a greater impact on their own 'sphere of influence'.

Previous research on the inclusion of advocacy content in teacher education programs also identified some challenges that were consistent with this study's findings: limitations placed by accrediting bodies, the concentration on curriculum content and the perception that advocacy is less critical than other topics. This study contextualises these findings to the Australian context. It also highlights that although these factors pose significant barriers to the inclusion of advocacy in teacher education programs, academics' professional beliefs, backgrounds and strong commitment to advocacy drive them to incorporate advocacy content into their units to, somehow, plant the seed that could potentially grow into developing EC teachers who see advocacy as a core professional responsibility.

## **Implications of the study**

This study has a number of implications for accrediting bodies, teacher education programs and early childhood academics. First, in order for there to be a clearer approach to the inclusion of advocacy in teacher education programs, it is important for accrediting bodies to provide a framework for advocacy instruction. As noted in Chapter Two, ACECQA includes advocacy in early childhood professional practice. However, it does not specify what type or level of advocacy an early childhood teacher is expected to undertake.

Second, capitalising on Woodrow's (2007) view of teacher education programs as constructors of professionalism that can support and promote the practice of systems advocacy, teacher education programs can extend the development of an advocacy disposition through an intentional focus on critical thinking skills based on Figure 2. The development of critical thinking skills can be applied to any knowledge base and included across all units in an early childhood program. This strategy would offer a consistent message to students within a whole program and could be a strategic and effective tool given the constraints posed by external bodies and pre-service teachers' constructions of teacher professionalism.

Lastly, there is scope for academics to reflect on their professional beliefs and perspectives on teacher professionalism as this has the potential to influence how students construct their professional identity as early childhood teachers. Academics are encouraged to revisit the content of their particular units and reflect on their intentionality in the development of the knowledge, skills and dispositions for students to imagine their professional role to include advocacy, particularly at the systems level. They must be clear about the message that they

want to impart and ensure that students understand that teacher professionalism can include multiple identities (Grieshaber, 2001) to enable students to embrace roles as nurturers of children in the classroom and advocates for their rights and needs in the macro context.

### **Limitations of the study and future research directions**

While this study has a number of significant findings in relation to systems advocacy, early childhood teacher education programs and the development of an advocacy disposition, it has several limitations. First, the study focused on undergraduate teacher education programs and it is acknowledged that majority of educators working in the sector have Diploma or Certificate III qualifications. Additionally, given the idea that an early childhood teacher's professional identity can be developed over time, the study overlooks the potential of postgraduate programs to develop a construction of teacher professionalism that includes systems advocacy. In relation to these limitations, a recommendation for future research is that this study be extended to include Certificate III, Diploma and Postgraduate programs to allow for a wider range of perspectives. Future research could also investigate the provision of advocacy professional development training.

Second, this study only focuses on the state of New South Wales. Given that ECE provisions and regulatory standards (as practiced) are inconsistent nationally (Fenech et al., 2012), future research could target programs nationally. This approach would allow for a more comprehensive analysis and understanding of how constructions of teacher professionalism might vary across state and territory

jurisdictions, and how advocacy as a professional responsibility is supported or constrained.

Third, the proposed theoretical framework is based on a very small sample and could be refined through further research. In relation to varied approaches that academics take to develop an advocacy disposition, future research could further test the effectiveness of building a knowledge and critical thinking skills base, compared with focusing on students' values and beliefs, by tracking the student cohort of each ECE program approach in a national longitudinal study. Such a study would investigate if and how an advocacy disposition was developed, and how it was applied later on in graduates' professional practice, particularly when employed in formal leadership positions. Such a study would explore the effectiveness of early childhood undergraduate programs to instil an advocacy disposition in students, thereby justifying its inclusion in the programs.

Lastly, this study is limited to the perspectives of academics. Given the paucity of Australian empirical research on advocacy, and systems advocacy in particular, it would be valuable for future research to ascertain a number of other perspectives. These perspectives could include those of pre-service teachers, practicing early childhood teachers and educators, teachers in leadership positions, and peak organisations.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate early childhood teacher education programs as constructors of teacher professionalism that supports and promotes the practice of systems advocacy. The study found that a number of barriers are present that

challenge the incorporation of advocacy in early childhood undergraduate teacher education programs such as accreditation requirements, curriculum crowding and the perception that the primary role of early childhood teachers is in the classroom working with children. Despite these barriers, most academics capitalise on the opportunities that are present for them and/or intentionally create opportunities to influence these dominant construction of teacher professionalism. These academics are driven by their professional beliefs, backgrounds, and commitment to social justice and advocacy to somehow incorporate advocacy in their units and do their best to develop an advocacy disposition in their students that they can only hope will be sustained through to their professional practice.



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## APPENDICES



## Appendix 1: Ethics Approval

10/3/2014

Macquarie University Student Email and Calendar Mail - RE: HS Ethics Application - Approved (5201400409)(Con/Met)



ANNA VICTORIA VELEZ <anna-victoria.velez@students.mq.edu.au>

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### RE: HS Ethics Application - Approved (5201400409)(Con/Met)

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Fhs Ethics <fhs.ethics@mq.edu.au>

Thu, Apr 24, 2014 at 1:01 PM

To: Dr Marianne Fenech <marianne.fenech@mq.edu.au>

Cc: Ms Anna Victoria Velez <anna-victoria.velez@students.mq.edu.au>

Dear Dr Fenech,

Re: "Exploring the incorporation of advocacy and social policy content in undergraduate early childhood teacher preparation programs in NSW"(5201400409)

Thank you for your recent correspondence. Your response has addressed the issues raised by the Faculty of Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee and approval has been granted, effective 24th April 2014. This email constitutes ethical approval only.

This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following web site:

[http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/\\_files\\_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf).

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Dr Marianne Fenech

Ms Anna Victoria Velez

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).
2. Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports.

Progress Report 1 Due: 24th April 2015

Progress Report 2 Due: 24th April 2016

Progress Report 3 Due: 24th April 2017

Progress Report 4 Due: 24th April 2018

Final Report Due: 24th April 2019

NB. If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

3. If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Sub-Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy

file:///C:/Users/Annie/Dropbox/2014%20Session%201%20&%202/MRes/Thesis/Current%20drafts/Appendix%201%20-%20Ethics%20Approval.htm 1/2



laws).

4. All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Sub-Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

5. Please notify the Sub-Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6. At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:

<http://www.mq.edu.au/policy>

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/policy](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/policy)

If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University's Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have approval, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Secretariat at the address below.

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of ethics approval.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Simon Boag  
Acting Chair  
Faculty of Human Sciences  
Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee

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Level 3, Research HUB, Building C5C  
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NSW 2109

Ph: +61 2 9850 4197  
Fax: +61 2 9850 4465

Email: [fhs.ethics@mq.edu.au](mailto:fhs.ethics@mq.edu.au)

<http://www.research.mq.edu.au/>

## Appendix 2: Initial Email Contact



Dear (participant name),

You are invited to participate in a study that aims to explore the extent to which undergraduate early childhood teacher preparation programs incorporate a focus on advocacy and social policy content and if these particular units aim to develop early childhood professionals as strong and effective advocates in and for the sector. The study will specifically focus on whether skills and dispositions of advocates are developed in undergraduate teacher preparation programs. The study also aims to identify the opportunities and constraints that foster or hinder the inclusion of advocacy- and social policy-related content in undergraduate teacher preparation programs.

This study is being conducted by Anna Velez, a postgraduate research student from the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. Anna can be contacted on 0468 657 275 or via email at [anna-victoria.velez@students.mq.edu.au](mailto:anna-victoria.velez@students.mq.edu.au). The study is being conducted to meet the requirements for the degree Masters of Research under the supervision of Dr Marianne Fenech, (02) 9850 9815, [marianne.fenech@mq.edu.au](mailto:marianne.fenech@mq.edu.au) of the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University.

Participation in this study involves obtaining an electronic copy of the unit outline of your courses [relevant course code and name inserted here] and a subsequent phone interview that should take approximately one hour. This interview will be recorded and transcribed for purposes of data collection and analysis. You will also be given an opportunity to review your transcript to check for accuracy and revise as you see fit.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

Should you complete a one hour interview for the purposes of this study you will be sent a \$40 Wish card as a token of our appreciation for your participation.

Please respond to this email to advise whether or not you would like to participate in this study.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you and kind regards,

Anna Velez  
Postgraduate Research Student  
Institute of Early Childhood  
Macquarie University

## Appendix 3: Information and Consent Form



Institute of Early Childhood  
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY NSW 2109 AUSTRALIA  
Phone +61 (0)2 9850 9820  
Fax +61 (0)2 9850 9890

### Participant Information and Consent Form

#### *Building advocacy skills and dispositions in early childhood teacher education programs*

You are invited to participate in a study that aims to explore the extent to which undergraduate early childhood teacher preparation programs incorporate a focus on advocacy and social policy content and if these particular units aim to develop early childhood professionals as strong and effective advocates in and for the sector. The study will specifically focus on whether skills and dispositions of advocates are developed in undergraduate teacher preparation programs. The study also aims to identify the opportunities and constraints that foster or hinder the inclusion of advocacy- and social policy-related content in undergraduate teacher preparation programs.

This study is being conducted by Anna Velez, a postgraduate research student from the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. Anna can be contacted on 0468 657 275 or via email at [anna-victoria.velez@students.mq.edu.au](mailto:anna-victoria.velez@students.mq.edu.au). The study is being conducted to meet the requirements for the degree Masters of Research under the supervision of Dr Marianne Fenech, (02) 9850 9815, [marianne.fenech@mq.edu.au](mailto:marianne.fenech@mq.edu.au) of the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University.

Participation in this study involves providing an electronic copy of the unit outline of your course [relevant course code and name inserted here] and a subsequent phone interview that should take approximately one hour. This interview will be audio recorded so that the researcher has an accurate record of what was said. This interview will later be transcribed for data analysis.

While participation in the interviews involves you stating your name and the unit that you convene. Providing this information will allow me to match your responses to the specific undergraduate unit that you convene, as well as information on the unit outline that you will provide. This means that the information you provide will not be anonymous. Please be assured, however, that only I will see your information. My supervisor will have access to unit outlines and interview transcriptions that have been de-identified and assigned pseudonyms. All data reported in subsequent journal articles will use this de-identified data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

A copy of any publication that uses the information you provide will be made available to you upon request.

MACQUARIE  
UNIVERSITY



Institute of Early Childhood  
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY NSW 2109 AUSTRALIA  
Phone +61 (0)2 9850 9820  
Fax +61 (0)2 9850 9890

Should you wish to participate please complete the attached Consent Forms, keeping one copy for your own records and emailing the researcher copy back to me.

Thank you for your interest in this project.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Velez  
Postgraduate Research Student  
Institute of Early Childhood  
Macquarie University



### Participation Consent Form (Unit Convenor's Copy)

I, *(participant's name)* have read and understand the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the journal article when available.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Block letters)

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email [ethics@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@mq.edu.au)). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.



**Participation Consent Form (Researcher's Copy)**

I, *(participant's name)* have read and understand the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the journal article when available.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Block letters)

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email [ethics@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@mq.edu.au)). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

## Appendix 4: Interview Schedule



Institute of Early Childhood  
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY NSW 2109 AUSTRALIA  
Phone +61 (0)2 9850 9820  
Fax +61 (0)2 9850 9890

### Interview Schedule

#### A. Background information

1. How long have you been in your current position? (*Check title if this is not noted on participant's responding email*)
2. Tell me about your professional background. What were you doing before taking on this role?
3. What is your experience in teaching and academic work?
4. Tell me about the unit. What is the unit all about?
5. Is this a unit you developed yourself?

#### B. Relevance of particular unit

1. Can you talk about how your unit focuses on advocacy and/or social policy?
2. When I was doing a web search for units that have advocacy and social policy content, I found that there are not that many units that have this focus. Can you tell me why you have this focus in your unit?
3. Why do you think it is important to have this focus (*question will be tailored to the content of particular unit outlines*)?

#### C. Advocacy and social policy content developing skills and dispositions

1. What specifically about advocacy and/or social policy is discussed in your unit?
2. How are these topics talked about?
3. What activities are given to students that involve these topics (readings, online discussions, group activities, assignments, projects, etc.)?
4. Do the activities aim to develop skills and dispositions of advocates? What in particular do they aim to develop?
5. In your opinion, how effective are the unit's activities in developing the skills and dispositions of expected advocates?

#### D. Perceived opportunities and constraints

1. What do you think are the opportunities for including advocacy/social policy content in early childhood teacher preparation programs?
2. What do you think hinders the inclusion of these topics?

#### E. Closing question

1. That's all the questions I wanted to ask you. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?



## Appendix 5: Initial Codes

Name	Sources	References
the unit	0	0
why focus on advocacy	6	9
what is the unit about	3	3
what does the unit aim to do	5	7
what do they do	7	13
skills	4	9
knowledge	4	7
how unit focuses on advocacy, how advocacy is talked about	7	24
levels	6	14
framed within other topics, indirect	3	6
ethics and social justice	4	7
how it is translated into practice, effectiveness	1	1
speculation, hard to say beyond the unit	4	4
raises awareness	4	5
encourages students to become advocates	1	1
how does the unit relate to other units	4	5
dispositions	7	19
development of the unit	1	1
professionalism	0	0
primary role is with the children and families, and the service	5	9
nice ladies	2	4
leader's professional role	6	16
increase professional status	3	4
everybody's professional role	5	12
advocacy is a professional role or responsibility	5	11
facilitators	0	0
using current issues	3	5
talking about it in context of professionalism	2	3
talking about different ways of practicing advocacy	3	5
involving professional organisations	1	1
included in program (course or unit) goals and topics	3	7
framing that daily practice is a form of advocacy	3	3
convenor's personal views	5	14
facilitator	0	0
barrier	0	0
barriers	0	0
too political, negative view of advocacy	4	4
relevance of topic	2	5
pressure from external stakeholders	1	1
philosophy of department	1	1
not sure what hinders inclusion	2	2
not part of EC professional role	3	4
not for everyone, intrinsic	4	9
not a core topic	4	7
limited discussion of advocacy to personal level	2	2
following students' interests, student centredness	3	12
different constructions of advocacy, inconsistent	1	1
curriculum crowding, limited time	6	9
advocacy is developed	5	11
advocacy is abstract, not concrete, ambiguous or esoteric	2	2
accrediting bodies	3	4



## Appendix 6: Sample Code Extracts

### Talking about different ways of practicing advocacy

<Internals\\Ella transcript> - § 2 references coded [13.22% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 6.63% Coverage

Facilitator: On that note, I just wanted to - because I was saying earlier that when I was actually looking for subjects or units that have an advocacy and social policy focus or content, at least, I found that there are not many units that have this focus. Why does your particular subject have this focus?

Interviewee: Yeah, look, I thought that was really interesting when you said that and I'd love to know, in a minute, when - you know, and I'd be interested in how many courses you searched, and so on, if that's feasible within the ethical requirements of your study but I think the key reason for us is because advocacy and activism are part of the early childhood educators professional ethical responsibility but I think I mentioned that before. So it's a key professional and ethical responsibility but I think that many students are drawn to working in early childhood because they're interested in working with children and teaching and caring for children on a day-to-day basis.

So part of the challenge is to try to provide a broad understanding that the role of activism and being an advocate in activism goes beyond the daily experience of working with children and families. So if you think about working with children and families at a service, say, for example, is a micro-context, but then there's this macro-context as well that is beyond the immediate daily experience of educators and has more to do with the political sphere. So, just thinking about your question again, I tend to think that the role of activism doesn't always sit comfortably with some of the traditional and gendered or stereotypical views of early childhood educators. So things like the concept - are you familiar with Anne Stonehouse's work?

Facilitator: Yes.

Interviewee: You know the concept of nice ladies. Yet, so there are lots of different visions, though, that underpin an educator's philosophy and that they may adopt. So some people might choose to take on a range of high profile or low public profiles. Others tend to - some people choose to work in small groups or [rely on others] with larger early childhood organisations and so on and in their various ways, pursue important issues of activism for children and families and the profession.

#### Reference 2 - 6.59% Coverage

Facilitator: You've told me why it's important to have this focus. So when we talk about advocacy and social policy in terms of developing skills, do you have - are there particular skills or dispositions or knowledge about advocacy and social policy that you touch on in this unit?

Interviewee: Well, bearing in mind it's one part of the subject, so it's such a huge topic or area to explore but we do talk about the importance, or talk about what advocacy and activism means. We look at - specific examples are considered, specific case studies. We draw on an example at the moment, which is getting a little bit old, which was the One To Four, Make It Law campaign. Are you familiar with that?

Facilitator: Yes, yes,

Interviewee: There are some other examples there as well. We look at different levels of advocacy and activism. Initially it's in relation to issues affecting children and families but then we also raise the importance of advocacy and activism for issues affecting the early childhood profession and then going more broadly to policy that might raise the status of the early childhood profession, work environment, so on and you know, what is actually happening at a political level that affects early childhood education and care. I would honestly say that while we endeavour to do that, we don't do it in the depth that we would if we had an entire subject devoted to advocacy because it's part of a subject.

Facilitator: So in terms of activities that are given to students about this subject or in this subject, would you say readings or online discussions, what do you have in relation to this topic?

Interviewee: Yeah, sure, well, we have readings, there are texts and current journal articles and so on. There is a forum of online discussions where students - we pose questions from the modules to promote online discussions. We have various clips to - YouTube clips that we insert in our online subjects that might link to presentations about people talking about the importance of advocacy and/or activism and how advocacy occurs in various ways in the early childhood sector. The assignments are certainly based on working with members of the team that they work with in their environments, in their workplace.

<Internals\\Hanna transcript> - § 2 references coded [11.22% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 3.67% Coverage

Facilitator: So you told me about what specifically about advocacy is discussed. I also got this from your outline. So when you say contemporary conceptions of advocacy, what do you mean by that?

Interviewee: Well we spend one lecture on that. I want them to think about different types of advocates and link it with different ideologies so for example the political spectrum from the left to the right. So there are different types of advocacy work that people are doing and therefore link it with contemporary conceptions from advocacy and how people use it to lobby and get things and get laws or get policies passed. Therefore I want them to have a good think about that and then perhaps identify in positioning themselves on the spectrum of left to right and how they stand on particular contemporary issues.

So for example now here in Australia, the budget cut and also the new budget plan and also this idea of childcare benefit and childcare rebate. Where do they stand on that? So that would be my hope of their understanding of contemporary conceptions.

Facilitator: So you relate it to current discussions?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Reference 2 - 7.55% Coverage

Facilitator: So how do you talk about being an advocate to them? Is it being an advocate in the classroom? In the centre? How is it talked about?

Interviewee: Well a couple of weeks ago we were talking about this in our class and I said that there are many types of different advocates. Some can be very active in the community to become activists. Some would be more so less comfortable about going into the public and expressing their thoughts. But whether they like the idea or not, I think at different levels we are all advocates. For example by communicating with parents, by communicating between the colleagues about a particular child's development and learning. That's one sort of advocate already. To the students I said if you are putting the child's welfare in front of your personal concerns or your personal conception of the child, then you are perhaps wearing the hat of advocate in that situation.

That's how I talk about becoming an advocate. Some students particularly might feel like well that's revealing our colours very clearly and I say well some people feel comfortable about that. We have different opinions, different voices, that's why we have right wing government, and we have left wing government. But the fact is I think the important part of it is how do we express our different points of view in a democratic way? How does leadership come in and how does advocacy come in in that light?

Facilitator: You mentioned that you talk about different types of advocacy. Is there a particular type of advocacy that you focus on when you discuss these topics in your unit?

Interviewee: Yes. When I present that in a lecture format I would bring in examples of different organisations that are around. I'm learning a bit more about Australian context. Australian context is a new thing for me. But I would bring in for example from the US, children's defence fund. What does that mean? Also other organisations that are focusing on children's rights. Therefore their

work would be considered in my eyes, advocating for children. Therefore that's where I'm teaching my bias to the students coming from a social justice perspective and really have a good understanding of the social context and the different historical baggage that different societies might have and what does that mean in this particular time?

<Internals\\Will transcript> - § 1 reference coded [3.06% Coverage]

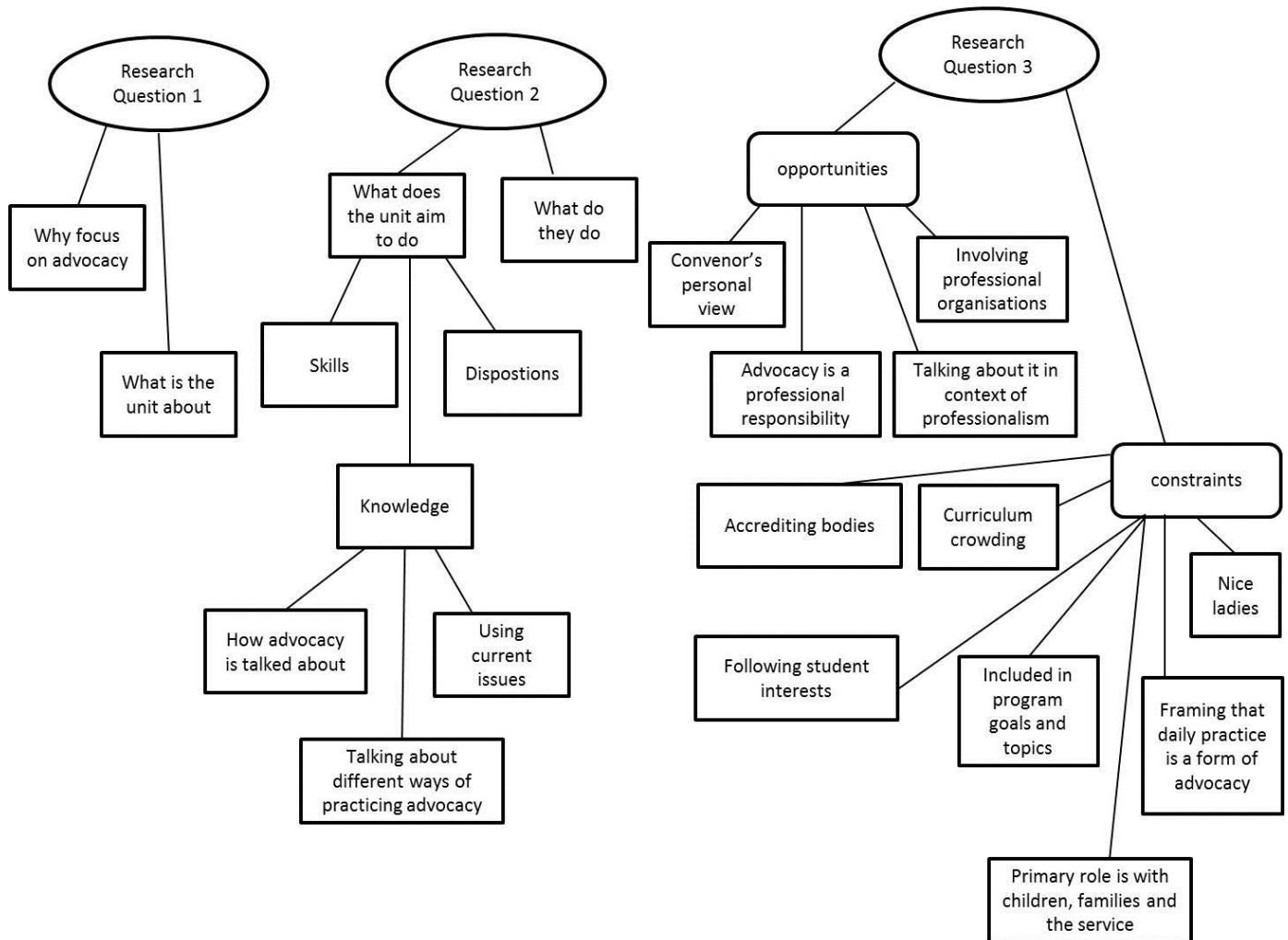
Reference 1 - 3.06% Coverage

Facilitator: Why do you think it's important to have this focus if it's not relevant or...

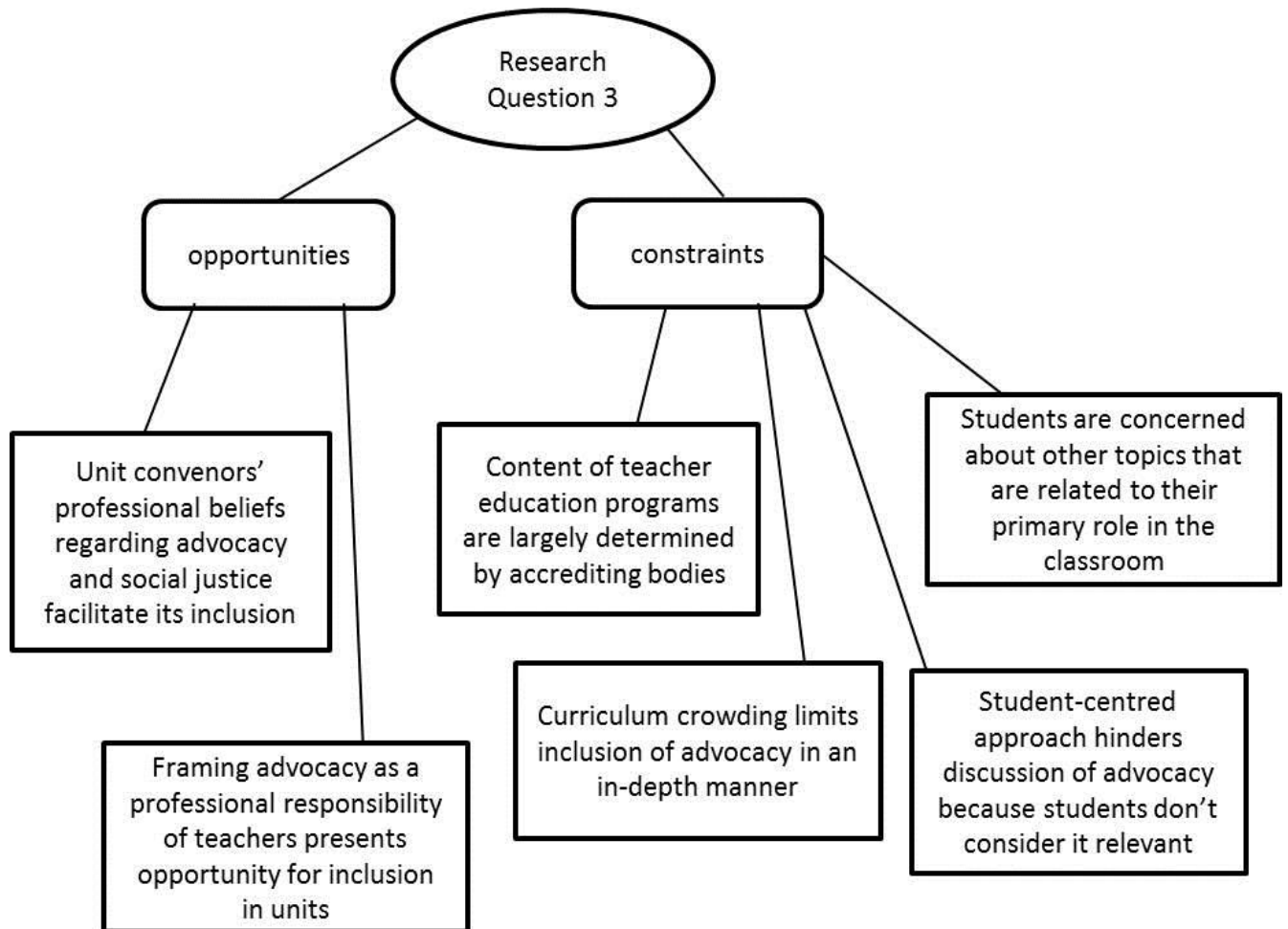
Interviewee: I think it's important just because it does - I think it maybe plants that kind of seed of something that maybe they will come back to later on. I'm not sure that all of them will. I'm not sure that all - in a way - not that they shouldn't, but I think it's an individual thing. I don't think you can force people to be advocates for something. In a sense, advocacy, I think, works best when it comes from a personal belief.

Hopefully, what we're showing them is successful leaders within the field who have taken on that role of - sometimes in a quiet small scale way. Maybe it's just within the local community. Sometimes it's in a bigger way, leading - being involve in, maybe, a campaign around a particular issue. It lets them see that there is that sense of leadership's about - as I said, what happens within the service, but it's also a bit about reaching out beyond that in some way.

## Appendix 7: Initial code mapping for Phase 3



## Appendix 8: Sample Thematic Map for Phase 4



## Appendix 9: Recoded Interview Data Structure

Name	Sources	References
Q1	0	0
extent of focus	7	21
focus on systems advocacy	6	15
Q2	0	0
activities	7	17
disposition	7	28
knowledge	7	28
skill	5	18
Q3	0	0
academics	0	0
advocacy is a key professional responsibility	6	13
professional philosophies	6	23
external	0	0
accreditation requirements	4	6
breadth of content	7	19
preservice	0	0
professionalism changes over time	5	13
relevance to students, student centredness	4	12
role is with children in the classroom	7	14



## Appendix 10: Sample Thematic Map for Phase 5

