

Supporting educators' professional learning for equity pedagogy: the promise of open educational practices

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Abstract

Purpose – In the research literature relevant to open educational practices (OEP), the terms “students” or “learners” often refer to individuals engaging in formal study. This study aims to broaden the conception of learners to include those who engage with continuing professional development or professional learning. The study focussed on one intersection of OEP with equity pedagogy for these learners.

Design/methodology/approach – Guided by transformative approaches to knowledge, the research is qualitative and draws upon nine focus group interviews about multicultural education professional learning needs conducted in November 2019 and July 2020 with 74 early years educators and staff. Data were analysed with theoretical thematic analysis to provide a rich overall description of the data set.

Findings – Early years educators and teachers aim to centre equity pedagogy in their practices but are constrained by a lack of opportunity to engage in professional development, and fragmented approaches to professional learning, issues which may potentially be addressed through OEP.

Originality/value – This paper extends understandings of OEP as a means of helping learners, broadly interpreted, to promote equity pedagogy. Specifically, it highlights the promise of OEP for addressing early years educators' professional development and learning about reconciliation and multicultural education.

Keywords Multicultural education, Professional development, Professional learning, Early childhood, Reconciliation, Intercultural curriculum

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In early years education and care settings, teachers play a fundamental role in helping children make sense of their world. From birth, children are sensitive to linguistic and cultural differences and before the age of 8, they notice difference, race and colour (Srinivasan and Cruz, 2015; Derman-Sparks and *The Anti-bias Task Force*, 1989). The early years is therefore a crucial time for children to learn about social diversity and equity. However, teachers often report feeling ill-equipped in addressing issues of cultural diversity with children or in negotiating cultural dilemmas with children's families (Murray, 2012; Szelei *et al.*, 2019). Without the relevant knowledge, skills and support, the opportunities for



teachers to use equity pedagogies are greatly diminished and, consequently, the goals of multicultural education are undermined.

This article considers the role of open educational practices (OEP) in contributing to early years teachers' professional knowledge in multicultural education. We adopt an expansive definition of OEP where such practices are located within specific teaching and learning contexts (Cronin and MacLaren, 2018; Bali *et al.*, 2020). In Australia's multicultural context, equity pedagogy in the early years means teaching for cultural and linguistic diversity and teaching for reconciliation with and for Australia's Indigenous populations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These priorities are reflected in the national early years curriculum, *Belonging, Being, Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), the *Alice Springs Mparntwe Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019) and a number of other policy and practice instruments that have reformed the Australian early years education and care sector over the past few decades (Grieshaber and Graham, 2017; Pascoe and Brennan, 2017). These have led to an increased focus on teacher and teaching quality, but concerns have arisen about inequities that may be emerging as a result of these reforms. In a profession where 11.9% of the overall workforce has a higher education qualification with the remainder qualified at lower levels (National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, 2021), reforms aimed at upskilling may disadvantage non-degree qualified educators who are often given less support, resources and rewards for engaging in professional development compared with their university degree qualified counterparts (Grieshaber and Graham, 2017). Against this backdrop, and mindful of OEP as a means for opening up education at all levels, the research question addressed in this study is, "How can OEP advance the equity pedagogy of practicing early years educators?"

The article begins by reviewing recent research on OEP and equity before describing the research approach and methods used in the study. The findings highlight three key themes that early years educators identified, followed by a discussion about how these themes support the expansive notion of OEP to include professional educators as learners. The study argues that OEP can benefit those outside the teacher–learner dyad and enhance the equity pedagogy of practicing early years professionals.

Literature review

Open educational practices

The term "Open Educational Practices" in academic literature describes a broad range of practices and ideas. Currently OEP encompasses open pedagogies, open learning, open practices or praxis and open education (Wiley, 2013; Stagg *et al.*, 2018) but multiple and conflicting definitions of openness (McNally and Christiansen, 2019) and the positioning of open in opposition to closed (Cronin and MacLaren, 2018) has led to OEP meaning a range of different ideas. As examples, OEP may or may not include Open Educational Resources (OER) (Cronin and MacLaren, 2018), they may focus on process or content (Koseoglu and Bozkurt, 2018), they may operate from formal definitions of OEP, frameworks and within highly supportive policy environments (Hegarty, 2015; McAndrew and Farrow, 2013) or they may not (Stagg *et al.*, 2018; Andrade *et al.*, 2011). McNally and Christiansen (2019) argued that ambiguities around the term "open" and unclear relationships between OER, OEP and open pedagogy have clouded the main priority of OER which should be pedagogy. They advocated for OER that could be used beyond the classroom, to be inclusive of learners who were not formally studying. This hints at the potential for OER to serve a much broader range of learners outside traditional notions of classrooms, teachers and students.

OEP as a field has always intended to expand the reach of education. In a 2007 report edited by Geser, which Cronin and MacLaren (2018) credit as the starting point for definitions and exploration of OEP, the focus on teachers and students was clear throughout. However, the term “worker” was mentioned eight times in the report, five times occurring in the phrase “teachers, students and workers” in the context of “competences, knowledge and skills to participate successfully in the knowledge economy and society” (Geser, 2007, p. 12). The intentional mention of workers is important for recognising that students will usually become or already are workers, but it also highlights that workers who are not students may benefit from OEP and OER. An example is provided by Miller *et al.* (2018) who described Assets Com, a project involving five universities and a range of community stakeholder groups. This project aimed to create professional educational resources for community workers (e.g. public sector professionals, community focussed practitioners) and the authors emphasised that “the recontextualisation of learning across [. . .] variously bounded spaces occurred through a choreography of project wide encounters that brought together various different groups of people, ideas, and artefacts through a range of virtual and face to face deliberative encounters” (Miller *et al.*, 2018, p. 198). Thus, the notion of learning itself becomes recontextualised when the potential for professionals and community stakeholders as beneficiaries of OEP is acknowledged.

The field of teacher education provides another fertile site for exploring the idea of involving professionals and community stakeholders in OEP. According to the *Recommendation on Open Educational Resources* (UNESCO, 2019, p. 6), knowledge about OER should be included in both in-service and pre-service teacher education to build teachers’ capacities in accessing, creating and manipulating OER. As OEP and OER are relatively recent developments in education, many in-service teachers will not have learned about these within their initial teacher education. One recent example showing the integration of OER and open pedagogy in an initial teacher education course was a study by Van Allen and Katz (2019) who wrote about the value of pre-service teacher exposure to open practices for promoting professional and community links. Graduating pre-service teachers become practising teachers, therefore, learning about OEP and OER in initial teacher education can broaden the reach of open practices within the teaching profession. For this reason, Allen and Katz (2019) recommended future research into, among other points, how OEP ultimately impacts teaching practices. The impacts of OEP and OER upon teaching remains an underresearched area and to date, very little research has been conducted on building practising teacher capacity through OEP or OER.

Equity pedagogy

Consideration of practicing teachers and their teaching broadens the potential for OEP to enhance equity pedagogy. Equity pedagogy is one of five concepts of multicultural education, and it is defined as “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate a just, human and democratic society” (McGee Banks and Banks, 1995, p. 152). Equity pedagogy presents a challenge for many teachers because it involves a deep understanding of diversity and its role in society, as well as a sound knowledge of culturally relevant, responsive and sustaining practices (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Senyshyn and Martinelli, 2020). Early childhood teachers reportedly grapple with equity pedagogy due to a low sense of self-efficacy with cultural competence (Atiles *et al.*, 2017; Djonko-Moore *et al.*, 2018), limited instructional resources and stakeholder support (Phoon *et al.*, 2013) and a lack of professional knowledge about appropriate assessment, differentiation, implementing

anti-bias teaching and working collaboratively with families who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Banerjee and Luckner, 2014; Karupiah and Berthelsen, 2011; Symeou and Karagiorgi, 2018).

Research stipulates that early childhood teachers require ongoing professional support (Othman and Ruslan, 2020), but teachers hold certain expectations of professional learning and development. In a scoping literature review about in-service professional development for intercultural and multicultural education, Tualaulelei and Halse (2021) identified that teachers preferred professional development that was contextualised, relevant, sustained and evidence-based over professional development that was generic, insufficiently customised and piecemeal. The authors further identified that there was a low utilisation of information and communication technologies in this area, and that teachers valued collaborative communities for professional development. These factors open up possibilities for exploring the contribution that OEP can make towards professional development for equity pedagogy.

This brief review has outlined that OEP was always intended as a means for lifelong learning, to be used by teachers, students *and* workers. As such, a rationale was presented for considering OEP as a means to enhance professional learning. Given the need for research in this area, this study asks, “How can OEP advance the equity pedagogy of practicing early years educators?”

Methodology

The research design of the study was based upon transformative and emancipatory approaches to adult learning (Freire, 2000; Mezirow, 2003) which interpret learning as a process that “transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Knowledge in this approach is legitimated through discourse and reflection with others, so learning is inherently social, and the educator’s role is to foster the understanding and skills for self-reflection and to create the conditions for learners to exercise their knowledge (Mezirow, 2003; Freire, 2000). Research from this perspective focuses on praxis which means “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 51) so an action research design was employed. Action research has three main phases: planning, execution of the plan and reconnaissance or fact-finding which create a cycle or repeated spiral of steps towards a research objective (Lewin, 1946; McKay and Marshall, 2001). The iterative process of action research appealed for this study because it emphasises pragmatism, responding to both the needs of the early years profession and the aims of OER. Approval from the university ethics committee (No. H19REA180) was obtained before the study proceeded.

This study reports on focus group interviews conducted for the first phase of two cycles of action research for a project reported in Tualaulelei (2020). A total of 9 interviews with 74 early years educators were collected in November 2019 (30 educators) and July 2020 (44 educators). The focus group participants included 31 early years educators and teachers, 33 centre directors and managers, 1 college principal and 9 professional support staff including administration officers, practice mentors and field officers. Most participants were based in south-east Queensland and all were female and currently working in Australian early years educational contexts, except for the college principal of an institute that offered post-secondary early childhood qualifications. The focus group interviews were held face-to-face in 2019 and via videoconferencing software in 2020, and there were 5 to 10 participants in each group. Interview questions were focussed on the multicultural education

and reconciliation professional learning of early years educators. The focus group interviews began by taking a broad perspective, to ensure the engagement of participants, before narrowing in on questions related to (and more targeted towards) the research focus (Christopher *et al.*, 2022). Each interview, lasting between 24 and 44 min, was transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Informed by responses gathered in the focus group interviews, two cohorts of pre-service educators enrolled in an undergraduate intercultural communication course at a regional university in Australia participated in a “renewable assignment” (Wiley and Hilton, 2018) which required the creation of resources that could potentially be openly published. The student submissions produced two collections of openly licensed resources for multicultural education and reconciliation (Tualaulelei and Hawkins, 2020; Tualaulelei and Macdonald, 2021) that were shared with the focus group participants and across library and early childhood education and care networks. Teacher feedback about the OER became part of the data set.

Theoretical thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data in relation to transformative learning theories. Initial codes were generated by coding participant responses about opportunities for professional discourse, reflection and action around equity pedagogy. The codes were subsequently organised into five prevalent candidate themes. These included the theme “classroom activities and ideas” which was ultimately discarded for emphasising professional action without reflection, an idea at odds with transformative adult learning. Another theme named “professional networking” was eventually subsumed into the other themes so that three of the five candidate themes remained. In what follows, we have aimed for a rich thematic description to offer a sense of what educators prioritised and to illustrate the multiple layers of equity pedagogy that can potentially be addressed through OEP.

Research findings

The perceptions and experiences of the 74 educators reflected the research literature regarding professional learning about multicultural education and reconciliation. Early years educators identified an urgent need for ongoing professional support as affirmed by one of the youngest participants of the study, who stated:

For me, I’ve been out of school for three years, and I learned nothing about reconciliation. I didn’t know what it was until I was given the opportunity through my company to explore it. I’m so glad I had been able to.

Another educator said:

We don’t need to be experts, but we do need to be educated, and having some sort of education is also respect for what we’re talking about as well and what we’re introducing to the children.

In-service professional learning was therefore perceived as important for addressing shortfalls of knowledge and to provide appropriate learnings for children. As for the potential contribution of OEP to equity pedagogy, the emergent themes from the analysis were: the lack of opportunity for professional development, the fragmented nature of professional development for equity pedagogy and OEP as a means for ongoing professional dialogues.

Lack of opportunity for professional development

A significant concern for educators was the lack of time available for professional development. For example, one educator stated, “We’re so time-poor. Like, today [this interview] is during the

day [. . .] if you do have staffing issues, you can't always attend to what you need to". Similarly, a centre manager stated:

From an operational level, you need time within to connect and to make conversations and to take phone calls if they come in at that time. But also from a managerial point of view, to be able to replace [staff].

Some of the time constraints were related to the nature of the early years setting, such as family daycare centres, as one educator remarked, "it imposes on our educators' time, because they're running their businesses out of their homes". Time was also mentioned in relation to other aspects of the job, for example, one teacher commented that:

Your two hours programming or three hours programming that you might be given each week doesn't give you an opportunity to do all that you need to do within that particular timeframe.

This led to many educators working overtime. As one administrator said, "They don't want to do anything out of work hours, which is fair enough, but sometimes that's the only time you get to do it". The busyness of the early years educators' schedules appeared to constrain opportunities to participate in professional development events.

Other issues related to lack of opportunity included funding and isolation. One teacher who connected with local Indigenous elders for cultural teaching stated, "I think we need to be able to access funding and money to pay for these additional learning experiences for the children and educators". The cost of relevant quality professional development was also prohibitive and educators described how they relied quite heavily on volunteers from the community, including parents. Administrators offered a different view, however, with one who observed:

We had a workshop Saturday, and I think practice mentors outnumbered, I think I only had two educators. That was it. Two educators [. . .] When you're wanting to get funding for something, you then run the risk that no one's going to show up, which is really, really hard.

For educators who were geographically isolated, an administrator noted, "We're all pretty regional. There's a lack of services to provide professional development training information support to those [regional] educators".

Fragmented nature of professional development for equity pedagogy

Interviewees further highlighted that professional development for multicultural education happened infrequently. Several educators mentioned that they had only had one professional development in multicultural education or reconciliation so far that year. They described how they found other avenues for receiving professional learning:

This is the first official one in the last year for me, but in saying that, I tend to do my own research and go from there and seek out things that can support me.

Yes, for me, this is my first professional development this year, but my [teaching assistant] has been studying her Bachelor [degree of Education] so it's been one of her subjects this year as in she's writing things about the reconciliation action plan and that kind of thing. I've also had some interesting conversations with parents around culture.

We have [a contact] up north who is great at researching and finding free things. She just sends them down to us and we just send them out to our educators.

Facebook groups and key cultural contacts were also mentioned as common resources. The educators' comments indicated that professional learning was an ongoing concern, but it

appeared to be happening in a piecemeal and unplanned manner. In contrast, one administrator described a planned approach that had worked well for her organisation:

I suppose it's sending people that you can [. . .] In the past, we've had professional development in our different areas and we've taken it back and then delivered it in the staff meeting.

This approach was available to larger organisations but it was not realistic for smaller, independent services with limited staff.

When asked what types of resources or support they thought early years educators needed for delivering or establishing quality multicultural education, one educator said, "The only thing that comes to my mind is that connecting [with other professionals]". Resources were a further concern for many educators in the study, with one saying, "Access to a variety of cultural resources that could potentially be quite a big hub for educators to access would be good". An administrator pointed to the challenge of providing resources that catered for everyone, saying:

The workload is very heavy for us because not only are we doing [early childhood] the Australian way, but we're also finding resources and building bridges for our educators who are super diverse, who have children who are super diverse, who have families who are super diverse.

The superdiversity of some early years contexts was therefore viewed as a challenge to providing professional learning resources.

Open educational practices as a means for ongoing professional dialogues

Soon after the resources were openly published, feedback was solicited by email. One local educator, who had adapted some of the ideas for language support from the resources, stated:

I like that there are links to [key guiding documents]. This is important for educators and seeing the connection in regards to regulations and how that all fits together. I like that there is a variety of information available. I feel that the information given is informative and valued. I also like that other educators can share their knowledge also.

Another educator, located on the other side of Australia, found the resource "appropriate for people who have little to no experience working with Indigenous children in mainstream educational settings". For herself, she was working in a remote Aboriginal community and she said, "it is more valuable for me to source my information and resources personally from people that live in the town". However, she praised the issues addressed in each collection and appreciated the hyperlinks that led her to further information.

Educator feedback also included suggestions for improvement. A minority of educators requested the inclusion of information not yet available i.e. more information about religions and advice for communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse families during enrolment. Educators also requested larger scale resources i.e. bigger language picture cards for classroom use and resources addressing a wider range of languages and cultures. The professional critique of our open resources was important for gauging their quality and utility. Moreover, it continued professional discussions that had started in the focus group interviews.

Discussion

Although OEP is often discussed in relation to formal educational practices, this study illustrates the role it can play in expanding education beyond formal teacher-student

relationships. The focus group interviews structured an opportunity for educators, who typically are at the receiving end of education and training (Green and Nolan, 2011), to be authentically involved and share experiences and perspectives about multicultural early childhood education and reconciliation. Our findings show that while early years educators were keen to learn more about equity pedagogy to address shortfalls in their professional knowledge and enhance their pedagogy, there were two main impediments. One was the lack of opportunity to engage in professional development due to time pressures, funding and geographic isolation. Another was the fragmented nature of professional development characterised by infrequency, individualised approaches and a lack of resources. Feedback about OER which pre-service teachers created to address educator concerns noted the role of OEP as a means for ongoing professional dialogues. By bringing the collective knowledge of early years teachers together through OEP, the study addressed the *Recommendation on Open Educational Resources* (UNESCO, 2019) building teachers' capacity to access and use OER at both a pre-service and in-service level. It further provided practising early years educators with OER that addressed contemporary, situated professional challenges about multicultural education and reconciliation which they felt were insufficiently resourced.

Overall, the findings point to the value of an expansive definition of OEP that includes the continuum of professionalism from those becoming professionals (students) to those already in the profession (workers) and perhaps beyond. In this study, in-service educators engaged in a type of professional dialogue with pre-service teachers throughout the process; practising educators informed the pre-service teachers' work, were the audience for the OER and they provided feedback and ideas for improvement. Centred upon the Freirean notion of praxis, the iterative process of reflection and action (Freire, 2000), knowledge about multicultural education and reconciliation was negotiated through discourse and reflections across the spectrum of professional peers. Through the OER, pre-service teachers offered practising educators what they had learned from cutting-edge theoretical insights and practice recommendations, but this was balanced by the practising educators who brought real-world experiences and deeper knowledge of the profession-in-action to the dialogue. This promoted equity pedagogy by building the capacity of all involved to effect social change (McGee Banks and Banks, 1995). In other words, through OEP, the conditions were enhanced for both pre-service and practising teachers to exercise their professional knowledge about equity pedagogy (Mezirow, 2003; Freire, 2000), and their improved professional knowledge was expected to flow into their current and future practices with children and their families.

In addition, the project recontextualised learning (Miller *et al.*, 2018) by positioning practising teachers as learners, and learners (pre-service teachers) as teachers and leaders of professional learning. Reconfiguring teacher and learner roles humanises the process of learning (Freire, 2000; McGee Banks and Banks, 1995) and it helps to flatten out hierarchies within social structures such as the teaching profession. This is especially relevant to contemporary learners who, in some cases, are already working in the professional context for which they are studying and who are seeking to improve their professional standing through upskilling. In the context of the study, Australian early years teaching was professionalised in 2008, so many of the "students" enrolled in degrees assume this dual teacher/student role. It is common to have pre-service teacher course participants with upwards of 10 years of experience in early childhood education and care services (e.g. see Hart, 2020 authored by an experienced educator/student). We contend that the professional capital of teachers is better acknowledged through processes such as OEP that democratise the creation of and access to professional learning resources from within rather than

through regimes of standards and quality that are imposed upon the profession from outside (Martin *et al.*, 2020). OEP holds the potential to democratise professional learning such that a wider diversity of professionals can have a hand in educating the next generation of professionals, who are themselves diverse.

The early childhood education and care sector is a major domain for children to learn about equity and diversity. It is therefore imperative that professionals working in this sector are offered the support they need to help children understand these aspects of their world (Pelo, 2008). Early years educators lack opportunities to access this much-needed support and they are often denied the systemic and continuous professional development opportunities their counterparts in the compulsory sectors of education have. This led the early years educators in this study to do their own research and reading and consult parents, families and community cultural experts. Yet rather than accept that each educator “find their own path” with equity pedagogy, our findings hint strongly at a role for OEP and OER to help democratise the processes through which educational materials and processes are created and shared (Farrow, 2017, VA Allen and Katz, 2020) for supporting the professional learning needs of early years educators. Moreover, our findings marry in-service teachers’ needs for local and customised resources with OER that are responsive, easily shared and adaptable for local contexts.

It is also important to acknowledge the unique series of events that had to coalesce for the success of the project, resonant of the “choreography” described by Miller *et al.* (2018). This study was supported by financial and expert support provided by the authors’ institution, with many decisions made around project logistics. Open practitioners require support to organise and sustain similar initiatives.

A limitation of the study was that the focus group interviews occurred nine months apart, with the second interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second interviews may have been coloured by the professional needs educators had for teaching early years education online as many were doing at that time (e.g. the teacher who wanted to connect with other professionals). Another limitation was that the study relied upon teacher feedback to gauge how OEP impacted their teaching practice. Future research could address these limitations by conducting interviews closer together and by conducting a deeper evaluation of OEP and teaching practices through interviews or observations.

Conclusion

The study was promising in inquiring into the research question: “How can OEP advance the equity pedagogy of practicing early years educators?” Findings identified that early childhood educators lack opportunities for professional development about equity pedagogy and that professional learning in this area has a fragmented nature. OEP were used to address their professional learning needs through the production of relevant OER, and feedback illustrated how OEP may be a means for ongoing professional dialogues. Overall, the study revealed the value of OEP for addressing the professional development needs of those who face barriers accessing it, such as early years educators. It also showed that OEP could help advance the equity pedagogy of early years educators through providing resources teachers could use immediately in their practice or for finding further information.

Questions that pose ongoing concerns about OEP in teacher education include: How can diverse perspectives of early years educators be promoted if the social structures that perpetuate inequity mean that most pre-service teachers come from non-marginalised backgrounds (Gide *et al.*, 2021; Blum *et al.*, 2021)? Relatedly, how can we ensure that

marginalised groups (e.g. Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities etc.) and those experiencing intersectionalities of discrimination (Simola, 2020) are recognised and authentically represented in OER? These inquiry questions have no quick and ready answers, but “imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power” (Freire, 2000, p. 75), we are confident that open practitioners will keep striving towards answering them.

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