

HARMONY AND TENSION IN CHILD CARE WORK: IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL FCS EDUCATION

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The purpose of this study was to explore how aesthetic concepts of harmony and tension contribute to the vocational goals and perceptions of students preparing for child care work.¹ Nine students, recently or currently enrolled in occupational family and consumer sciences (FCS) child care programs and courses, were interviewed regarding their perceptions of harmony and tension in their schooling and work. Respondents indicated that they experience harmony in their love of children, enjoyment of teamwork, and personal mission to help children. Their interest in child care services often began in childhood, then grew stronger with hands-on experience in child care labs or centers. Although several participants briefly mentioned a desire for better wages and more respect from society, such tensions seemed to be accepted and not critically questioned. Educators in occupational child care programs should strengthen curriculum to help learners identify, critique, and address tensions such as low status and low pay within the larger societal environment.

Drawing on Dewey's concept of art as experience (1934), scholars continue to argue that aesthetic quality occurs whenever we detect tensions between multiple and conflicting elements and consequently seek meaningful harmony, order, and purpose (Broudy, 1972; Eisner, 1990; Kupfer, 1983). We experience harmony as we arrange details into coherent long-term plans, respond to external demands in a meaningful way, engage in activities that evoke positive feelings, and live out significant values and themes. We can experience tension when certain aspects of our lives are frustrating or distasteful, when unexpected events thwart our plans, or when new goals produce uncertainty (Zuo, 1998).

Child care work involves an astounding array of experiences that can produce harmony and tension--from implementing creative lesson plans to complying with strict regulations, from providing emotional support and discipline to giving basic physical care (Lindsay & Lindsay, 1987). Child workers consider their daily work to be motivating and interesting, and they experience a high degree of harmony and satisfaction (Curbow, 1990; Manlove & Guzell, 1997). However, research seems to focus on tensions such as burnout, stress, and low wages that threaten this sense of harmony (Curbow; Fuqua & Couture, 1986; Lindsay & Lindsay; Wolf & Walsh, 1998). Students preparing for child care work can expect to experience both harmony and tension as they enter the dynamic, complex, and changing child care environment.

Although students would benefit from understanding factors that produce harmony and tension in child care work, occupational family and consumer sciences (FCS) curriculum tends to emphasize technical "competencies" and "employability skills" (Combs & Hall, 1996; Kreutzer, & Weis, 1988). The goal is to shape students' knowledge and skills to fit with responsibilities in

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the child care industry. Although the development of skills needed to succeed in child care certainly is not wrong in itself, a sole emphasis on skills can eclipse attention to larger societal tensions and political issues that condition work (Samper & Lakes, 1994).

The purpose of this study was to draw on the concepts of harmony and tension to explore vocational beliefs, attitudes, and meanings of students enrolled in occupational FCS child care programs at secondary, postsecondary, or certificate levels. Research questions were:

- In what ways do students preparing for the child care field describe their choice of work, factors influencing their choice, and sense of career development?
- What types of harmony appear salient to their personal sense of work and vocation?
- What tensions appear salient to their personal sense of work and vocation?

The study also was intended to draw out implications for occupational FCS education in the area of child care services.

Harmony and Tension in Child Care Work

Aesthetic experience occurs whenever individuals take an active role in harmonizing the multiple and often-disparate elements of their everyday lives into mutually enhancing relationships, a meaningful sense of purpose, and satisfying values and life themes (Kupfer, 1983).

In aesthetic experience, we respond to what is presented to us by discriminating among its constituents so as to integrate them into a unified whole. The whole is formed out of the interaction among its parts. While these parts are distinct, . . . their relations with one another and their place in the whole is [sic] decisive for their meaning and their value The parts are interdependent, forming a kind of community. (Kupfer, 1983, p. 4)

Because each person faces a different work situation and environment, with particular elements and unique relationships, vocational development can be viewed from an implicitly aesthetic perspective (Rehm, 1993, 1998, 1999).

Contextual Framework: Harmony and Tension

The numerous elements of a vocation--including goals and opportunities to achieve goals, relationships with people, and personality traits--provide many possibilities for both aesthetic tension and harmony. On one hand, individuals experience aesthetic harmony when they are able to draw from the available elements to create a meaningful balance and a satisfying sense of coherence. On the other hand, tension results when individuals consider a number of the elements to be so unappealing or overwhelming that they are unable to create a sense of meaning, harmony, or order to their experience (Broudy, 1972; Eisner, 1990).

The aesthetic challenge is to strike a balance between harmony and tension for vocational satisfaction and development. Tensions can positively challenge personal growth and motivate positive development, yet too much tension can lead to personal dissatisfaction, failure, or despair. Harmony can provide joy and satisfaction, yet too much harmony can lead to unquestioned routines, boredom, or indifference (Broudy, 1972; Kupfer, 1983). Because some people thrive when faced with uncertainty and others need stability, harmony and tension are somewhat individualized.

Research suggests that child care work offers a rich environment full of tension and harmony. Small and Dodge (1988) reveal an astonishing range and number of roles, skills, and job tasks associated with professional child care work. These include value-laden responsibilities to nurture and discipline, educative functions to teach everything from hygiene to social skills, and legal duties to enforce state regulations. Workers must respond to numerous tensions and unify multiple tasks in order to care for children and still maintain their own sense of energy and motivation.

Although an understanding of individual meanings and experiences regarding harmony and tension in child care work would benefit FCS educators, related research from the occupational student's perspective is clearly lacking. Hultgren's 1996 review of research included no studies regarding the meanings and experiences of students in occupational child care programs, and the authors' own search produced no further studies since that time. Perhaps research intended to learn more about personal meanings and experiences of occupational child care students is negated by demands to meet technical criteria specified by federal and state funding agencies (Andrian, 1986; Stout & Martin, 1996). We can, however, glean some idea of harmony and tension facing students from the existing body of literature on child care workers.

Harmony in Child Care: Purpose, Autonomy, and Relationship

Research indicates that child care workers have high degrees of harmony with their daily activities. The skills involved in the work are in accord with their love of children, cognitive interest in understanding child development principles, and affinity for direct personal relationships with children (Tuominen, 2000). Individuals with decision-making power have opportunities to harmonize their situations in independent and personally satisfying ways. Child care workers who have freedom and authority to apply their knowledge and skills rate their jobs as highly satisfying (Lindsay & Lindsay, 1987). Those who believe that they can control their environment express higher levels of achievement and lower levels of stress (Fuqua & Couture, 1986).

Although child care workers enjoy personal freedom and power to express creativity and knowledge, Boyd and Schneider (1997) note they simultaneously have "a desire for a shared vision or philosophy" (p. 178). Highly relational people thrive in the field (Manfredi/Petitt, 1993) and experience a strong sense of harmony in working directly with children (Tuominen, 2000). They feel comfortable in environments in which they are guided by a group philosophy and have frequent opportunities to contribute to the shared goals of a team.

Tensions in Child Care: Burnout, Stress, and Context

Interestingly, a large portion of research seems to focus on negative tensions experienced by child care workers. One of the most pervasive problems seems to be burnout, defined as the process of becoming emotionally exhausted, detached, and helpless (Manlove, 1993; McMullen & Krantz, 1988). Personality traits are often used to distinguish satisfied from dissatisfied child care workers, and highly reactive individuals with an external locus of control have difficulty managing stress (Curbow, 1990; Fuqua & Couture, 1986). Individuals who cannot situate particular problems within a larger unifying purpose or meaning, or cannot design strategies for resolving challenges, experience a sense of negative tension.

Whereas some negative tensions arise due to personality traits, others are associated with particular child care environments. Settings become problematic for a number of reasons: workers are expected to fulfill conflicting roles and experience role ambiguity (Manlove, 1993),

support and decision-making opportunities are lacking (Boyd & Schneider, 1997), income is insufficient (Bollin, 1993), or isolation from other adult workers is high (Curbow, 1990; Tuomin, 2000).

Particular tensions may vary according to whether the care situation is structured as a profit, nonprofit, or family day care. Individuals who provide family day care consider themselves paid professionals who expect parents to pick their children up by closing hours and to pay on time; yet they struggle with emotional attachments with those they serve and often break their own rules to avoid interfering with the relationship (Bollin, 1993). Multicultural diversity has been associated with unintentional misunderstandings between workers and parents concerning the treatment of children (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998).

Reflecting the aesthetic principle that a rich social environment "squanders none of the talent, industry, or capacity of its members" (Kupfer, 1983, p. 74), some researchers have critiqued child care work within the larger community. Job satisfaction is "continually challenged by the limited wages, few benefits, and the providers' own perceptions that society considers child care a low status, low skilled position" (Goelman & Guo, 1998, p. 186-187). Modigliani (1986) claims that child care employees acknowledge "a bitter tension between their own appreciation for their work and society's lack of appreciation" (p. 53).

Wolf and Walsh (1998) take a critical look at the tensions within the political context of child care, asserting that "the long, demanding and poorly compensated days" (p. 43) of child care work are increasingly regulated by state agencies. Although these authors acknowledge that specific standards are not bad in themselves, the increasingly prescriptive nature of licensing leads to more supervision and less personal freedom for workers. They argue that workers must take a political stance and participate in the decision-making processes that affect them.

Tuominen (2000) similarly argues that workers must question ideologies that oppress them. For example, child care workers suffer low wages and low status because the "private" nature of their work renders their societal service and economic value invisible. Thus, a major challenge in addressing these externally imposed tensions is for workers to increase their personal capacity for social critique and their cumulative power for action in the political context.

Tensions can play a positive role in vocational life when they spark motivation, pose an interesting challenge, and spawn action toward change. The tensions implicit within significant unanswered questions or meaningful goals can compel workers to move forward to transform their own thinking and the quality of their environment. However, research indicates that child care workers who do experience tensions such as burnout tend to leave the field (Manlove & Guzell, 1997) rather than embracing the political arena as a place to address poor working conditions or improve other tension-producing situations (Wolf & Walsh, 1998).

Students who are studying to be child care workers in occupational programs at different educational "articulation" levels (Villafaña, 1995) have not been studied for their individualized meanings. Given the complex nature of child care work, occupational FCS educators would benefit from a deeper understanding of why students enter the field and how they perceive the harmony and tension involved.

Methodology

Only recently have qualitative studies (Tuominen, 2000; Wolf & Walsh, 1998) attempted to address the meanings and lived experience of child care work. This exploratory research

involved a small sample and personal interviews to capture child care students' personal meanings and unique viewpoints regarding the harmony and tension in their vocational area.

Sample

Nine students currently or recently involved with some form of occupational child care education were selected for inclusion in the study. The students all worked in school based or community child care settings. Although the results from this small sample are not intended to be generalized, the study's validity can be judged by whether or not it reveals new insights into child care work experience, illuminates theory and contributes knowledge regarding harmony and tension, and suggests improvements for practice (Patton, 1990).

Names of potential participants were gathered from key administrators and teachers at a community college, a vocational-technical school, and a large child care center that encouraged worker education within a medium-sized southern city. Selection criteria included: currently or recently involved with some type of occupational education for child care work, involved with practical work in a child care laboratory or community center, and willing to participate. The Appendix provides a brief overview of participants' pseudonyms, age, ethnicity, and educational level. Eight participants were female and one was male. There were three African Americans, three Caucasians, one Hispanic, and two of West Indian decent. Two had children, and all were under 35 years of age. Bette was a high school student attending a vocational child care program half-days; three participants (Ally, Chris, Darcy) attended a vocational-technical program; Errol, Faye, and Gail had earned associate degrees from a community college; Irene attended a community college; and Hanna recently acquired a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The sample was educationally motivated and many already were beginning to pursue further education, not surprising given the fact that they lived in a university town with plentiful educational opportunities.

Procedure

Interviews were used to collect data because they provide a means to enter into another person's perspective (Patton, 1990). They generate descriptive detail, reveal individual constructions of meaning, suggest differences and similarities among individuals within a sample, and illuminate theory. Interviews were considered valuable in learning more about how students, with experience in occupational programs and child care services, think about tension and harmony in their chosen field.

A structured interview guide comprised of open-ended questions was developed by the researchers to gain information about each participant's general beliefs, meanings, and attitudes regarding their education and work in child care. In order to gain insight into factors that contribute to a sense of harmony, several questions focused on personality traits, interests and values, and satisfactions regarding child care work. In order to gain understanding about factors that produce tension, other questions pertained to dislikes, obstacles, and desired changes or goals. Several questions dealt with motivations for entering child care work, personal development, and future goals.

Interviews were conducted in each participant's home, workplace, or school site and audio-taped. Although a few participants spoke somewhat eloquently, most participants were concise and did not elaborate in detail even upon probing. Thus, most interviews lasted only about 30 minutes. Following verbatim transcriptions of tapes, individual interviews were analyzed as follows: A timeline sketch was devised for each student regarding initial interest,

key experiences, and future goals. Key themes were identified within each individual's interview narrative with a focus on those concerning tensions and harmony. Individual themes of harmony and tension then were compared and contrasted with others in the sample. Finally, larger categories of relationship among themes were generated and examined in light of existing research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Because of the small sample and exploratory nature of the study, no attempt was made to distinguish patterns of difference based on gender, race, age, or program type or level.

Findings

Participants described only minimal tensions, and these were not considered numerous or overly problematic. Participants devoted more time and enthusiasm to describing a sense of harmony in relation to personal love of children, satisfying and joyful experiences with children, and a higher mission to benefit the very educational, civic, and personal futures of children. The choice of career was often but not always rooted in childhood, harmonized with future goals, and unified with a worldview that valued direct interaction and involvement with children but ignored social critique and activism.

Harmony with Children

Students preparing for child care work experienced several types of harmony. First and foremost, they felt a passionate connection between their heart and vocational choice. They seemed to possess a fundamental, spontaneous, and innate love of being with children that harmonized with their past experience and future dreams. Moreover, they indicated a sense of harmony in a strong sense of calling or mission to make a positive, long-term impact on children's lives.

"Just being with the kids." Participants expressed a heartfelt love and harmony in simply "being with the kids." When asked what they liked best about child care work, all participants gave a similar passionate answer: "The kids." "The smiles." "I love the kids." "The kids pull you." "I absolutely adore them." Even the participants who were enrolled full time in a vocational child care program and had no paid work experience much preferred the "awesome" hands-on laboratory experience at the on-campus child care center over the "book work."

Participants possessed a cognitive interest in the ways that children grow and develop; they enjoyed "helping them learn" through varied activities such as reading stories, drama, science, cooking, water play, finger painting, and "messy" play. They showed a nurturing interest in "just taking care of all these kids." And they expressed a fun-loving perspective: "They bring out the kid in me. I like to play with them." Although such activities might appear simple or insignificant to outsiders, these participants envisioned a much larger meaning and value to their daily interactions with children.

On a mission to contribute to meaningful lives. When asked to describe their goals, participants felt that daily activities of stories, play, and basic care were essential to a much greater mission. They experienced harmony not only in the presence of kids, but they felt a harmony with the future. Their comments indicated a passionate belief that they can play a significant role in shaping cognitive, social, emotional, and physical capabilities to "better the kids' future."

- Children are making bad decisions more and more as the years go on and I want to help. I want to make a change in children's lives and affect how they are when they grow up. I want to be part of that. (Bette)

- I am responsible for making sure, number one, that the children are safe and healthy, and teaching them how to be real individuals and be affectionate. (Errol)
- Open their minds a little more. That's a really good thing to be part of that stuff in someone's life, somebody else's child. (Irene)
- I hope that I can teach my kids some of the values that my parents have taught me so that when they grow up they are not in jail somewhere. (Gail)

These participants felt a spiritual harmony with their mission, fully expecting to play a significant role in the children's quality of life in the future. By helping each child, they wholeheartedly believed they were contributing a valuable service to society.

Coming to child care work and continuing to dream. Harmony appeared in participants' development and growth in finding a career that meshed with childhood experiences, personal themes and interests, and dreams for the future. Memories from the past and a sense of purpose served as important forces in the career choice. They remembered particular experiences that provided knowledge about children, enhanced understanding of others, strengthened personal identity, and solidified their vocational direction.

Interestingly, two participants decided to pursue a profession with children because they wanted to help other young people avoid certain tensions they had experienced. Bette drew upon her own differences with her family to set a goal, unique within this sample, to bring parents and children together.

- In ninth grade I got in trouble and actually got arrested. I have a great family and I do stuff with them. But I can't tell my Mom I want to do this, this, and this without getting into trouble because they don't like people I hang around with. And I decided that if I can help the parents and children come together, they won't end up making the same mistakes I did.

Although Bette indicated specific educational goals to earn her CDA credential on through graduate degrees in child development, a personal theme of assisting parents and children become "best friends" and have "the best relationship" underlined her career interests.

Hanna recently earned her CDA and found harmony in child care work gradually. Several things seemed to come together in her sense of career. Her own experience of being left out as a child gave her a special sensitivity to children's feelings.

- For me being a child, I wasn't treated really bad or anything, but sometimes some kids get left out if they are not as pretty as the other little girls would be. And that kind of touched my heart. I was like, I don't ever want to be like that toward anybody, because that person is just as beautiful as the other little girl could be. That was the biggest thing in my childhood experience impacting my job.

After getting a child care job, she realized "the longer I stayed the more I got to like it." Hanna also tried an office job and didn't like it. She began to recognize how much she cared for children, and she now dreams about being that special caregiver that prompts children to come back later and say, "I remember Miss Hanna!" She liked to "take notes on everything" because she hopes to open her own center in the future.

Most participants had very positive childhood memories that played a role in their sense of vocational harmony. Errol did not plan to work with children until he saw that friends in the field were having fun, "ended up liking it more than I thought," and now seems to realize that he can model the positive values he learned from his family.

- I was raised in a nice home, people took care of me and I felt that, if kids want to move up to be like who I am--and I think I am doing pretty good, I have to apply the same concepts towards them.

Although Errol did not yet have a specific work goal, his family and his appreciation of "kind and understanding people who helped me along the way" seemed to relate to a "teamwork" theme. His numerous references to being able to get along well with people contributed to a sense that his personality was a "good fit" for working with children.

Other participants identified helping children as a career while they were still young themselves. Gail traced her interest in children to the third grade: "I was always interacting with kids younger than I was. I'd help them with their homework after school or do after school games." She spent quite a bit of time helping her cousin with a learning disability and believes she played a role in his current plan to attend college. Although Gail eventually hopes to become a center director as she gets older and has "less energy to teach," she plans to "always be connected to kids." She identified child care as a career reflecting her own supportive family--providing opportunities for close-knit relationships and passing along "all the values that my parents instilled in me."

Irene, enrolled in a community college child development program and working on her state's 20-hour certificate in child care, also had very positive early memories.

- I had a really, really good child care experience where I went to preschool, where I went to elementary school. Even now I might see one of my teachers and they are smiling still. I know that I could give that back.

Irene was particularly "pulled in" by the fascinating questions regarding the actions of individual children: "What is sparking something in their mind? Where did they come up with this story? Where are they going?" Her goal was to use her vivid imagination and own a day care center where she could "be a teacher, caregiver, and role model."

Ally's career choice was similarly rooted in childhood: "When I was a little girl I used to love to be a teacher, and wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. That has been my dream to work with kids." As a full-time student at a vocational-technical school, she wanted to "learn from the teachers" so she could "better the kids' future." Chris, also a full-time student at the same school, "didn't have much option. I like to work with kids. So I said, start early, and learn their ways and actions, and the system." Although Chris was paying for her schooling by working in restaurants, her long-term goal was to own a child care business with her mom.

Darcy had very specific goals to become a 2-year-old teacher at a church preschool, then eventually open her own day care. She decided that she wanted "to just work with kids" as a teenager.

- My friends had babies, and I became a nanny who took care of my friend's kids. I started hanging around and having fun with kids. I wanted a career where I didn't care so much about the money. I just want to be happy.

Since entering a child care program at the local vocational-technical school, Darcy learned that harmony grows in a small but potent way given the proper opportunities: "You get a seed, and you know and feel out different ways, the best way to react, how to handle different things."

At the same time these individuals developed child-centered goals in light of their own growing up, comments show that harmony with adult associates also is important: "Most of the people I work with are very dedicated to their job or the big field of early childhood development." "I like to work with people who respect others and are involved with the kids, their education." "I like the people I work with, caring people, nice people, outgoing, not afraid

to tell me how they feel about something." Participants agreed that child care work provided opportunities for a relatively happy family-like environment.

A few of the participants additionally noted that having enough resources for varied activities, opportunities to work at their own pace, and an atmosphere of honesty and enthusiasm contributed to the sense of harmony at work. The participants who had children liked the fact that their field of study provided knowledge and ideas for parenting, suggesting a harmonious fit of work and family.

The Surprising Lack of Perceived Tension

Members of this sample seemed to find very little negative tension or dissatisfaction with their field of work. Four participants could not even think of one thing they disliked about child care. The others came up with only very minor things during the interview. Full time students at the vocational-technical school did not particularly love the "book work" in contrast to the work in the on-site child care center. Others somewhat laughingly noted that they didn't like changing diapers, "kids biting my fingers," staff conflicts or gossip, or working with those few "bad apples" and "lazy" co-workers. Such tensions did not disrupt the more fervent personal sense of harmony with the career area. As one participant noted, "You just have to learn to work around them."

The majority of participants were "thrown off" by a question regarding their talents and skills. The first response was that they didn't have any, indicating that they accept the unfortunate presumptions that "anyone can do child care work" and that it does not demand talent or special knowledge. However, with prodding they eventually described a variety of special personal qualities such as ability to communicate, come up with creative new ideas, play with the children, get along with others, empathize with children, teach skills, remain orderly, and ensure safety. They considered their abilities to be patient, understanding, fun loving, imaginative, and flexible as necessary for success. An important "hidden" tension was revealed in the finding that the participants seemed to sell their talents short while believing in the importance of the child care worker role.

No participant in this study expressed concern about tensions such as burnout or stress, and only three respondents mentioned dissatisfaction with the low pay and status. Bette expected that "some parents may not like you telling them what is going on with their kids," indicating that she suspected parents might question her status and professional judgment. Faye insisted, "Working with young children is much more important than our society lets on." And Hanna similarly noticed "people treat you like you are not doing anything," but she had stopped letting that bother her because "it is something I want to do and it doesn't matter what anybody says." Perhaps the general lack of outrage or even attention concerning tensions such as poor wages and low respect is due to the relative youth and short-term span of experience of the students.

As a testament to their commitment, these respondents did not allow society's misconception to damper their enthusiasm or certainty of the value of their work. However, it is important to note that they did not express any sentiment toward activism or plan to enter the political process to attempt to improve societal attitudes and structures that condition child care work.

Discussion

Some of the most interesting findings in this study relate to the students' heavy focus on the importance of harmony and inattention to the political and economic tensions that condition child care work (Tuominen, 2000; Wolf & Walsh, 1998). Given the love of "just being with the kids," it is not surprising that participants would focus their vocational interests in terms of harmony with the heart. They combined many elements in their daily experiences--a sense of fun, enthusiasm, opportunity to learn more about children, opportunity to gain skills in teaching essential knowledge and values, teamwork with coworkers, and personal characteristics such as organization and imagination--into a unified sense of a vocation. Moreover, the career area harmonized with their own childhood memories as well as a larger sense of mission to make a real difference in the future of each child and society.

Occupational education for child care work traditionally has been structured to develop employability skills such as problem solving, technical knowledge, and cooperation (Stout & Martin, 1996; Villafaña, 1995). Such lessons seem to resonate with students who already love children and are eager to practice skills that will enable them to work successfully with children, parents, and administrators of centers. Judging from student satisfaction, it would seem that occupational education is very successful in preparing students to harmonize knowledge and skill with their future tasks and responsibilities.

Although these participants did dislike a few aspects of child care such as lazy coworkers and low status, these tensions did not threaten the powerful sense of harmony with their career area. This is in sharp contrast to child development research that tends to highlight the burnout, stress, low wages, and low status prevalent among child care workers (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Lindsay & Lindsay, 1987; Manlove, 1993; McMullen & Krantz, 1988; Modigliani, 1986). One possible explanation is that problems such as inaccurate public perception, stress, and low pay are remote from the daily horizon of students and beginning workers. Young students likely would not experience tensions such as trying to save for retirement on minimal wages; they would not have the longevity to experience burnout.

The fact that many students in this study did not immediately claim special abilities, gifts, or talents--while insisting their work was valuable to society--indicates an inadvertent acceptance of the current ideology that caring work is not "real" work that requires a special set of skills (Modigliani, 1986). Moreover, they did not seem to question tensions within the societal and economic power relations that affect child care workers (Tuominen, 2000; Wolf & Walsh, 1998). None of the students in this study claimed a voice in decision making on issues that affect them, planned on engaging in public policy issues, or expressed a desire to work in the political context to change existing ideological and reward systems. This lack of political interest possibly could be attributed to the workers' inexperience and youth, a personality type attracted to working with children and not activists, or a combination of these and other factors.

As Dippo (1998) argues, vocational education should prepare students for a larger "sustainability" perspective that pays attention to "the constructive and critical tension" (p. 328) between global issues and local problems, between economic equity and social justice. However, this study supports the contention of Eyre and Peterat (1990) that FCS education focuses on individualistic issues over social issues, knowledge acquisition rather than social critique, and coping and management skills rather than social critique.

Implications for Education

The study suggests a number of implications for FCS education programs with a wage earning emphasis on child care services. Family and consumer science educators should continue to draw upon qualities of harmony in career guidance, helping students identify where they gain vocational satisfaction, and how they might carve a personal niche within a child care career. Shields (1993) notes that first impressions of a field of work are extremely important, and orientation should increase self-awareness, practical understanding of the responsibilities, and a sense of the possibilities. Teachers should orient students to the tensions that may come with child care careers later, but they should also introduce reflective and critical-thinking strategies regarding the multiple challenges that occur over the long-term development of a child care career.

Discussions and debates could help students clarify goals, point out problems and issues in their communities, identify tensions and underlying causes, assess the merits of alternative perspectives, and suggest solutions. Students should be taught to probe the deeper issues and questions that Eyre and Peterat (1990) argue are typically neglected: Why does society not place higher value on child care? Who sets standards such as salary structure and state regulations that affect workers, and on what basis are decisions made? Who benefits, and who sacrifices? The students in this study very much enjoyed experiences in school-based or community child care centers, and they believed they were able to develop skills in working in the complex settings of child care. Such work experiences should be strengthened so that students "read their lived realities as text" (Samper & Lakes, 1994, p. 102) and critically assess the harmony and tension within their work sites (Simon & Dipppo, 1987).

One of the primary challenges in occupational education for child care services seems to be the need to help students gain a sense of active contribution in determining policies that affect them. If "an emancipatory vocational education would not merely provide access to the culture of work but would empower students for the possibility of change" (Rehm, 1989, p. 116), FCS educators should help students reflectively critique the harmony and tension between child care work and the larger social/political environment. Students could participate in projects that take them into the community to express their voice and actively engage in resolving issues of concern. For example, they might participate in public hearings when child care issues are at stake, write letters to the editors of local newspapers, advocate beneficial policies, participate in online discussions about national child care issues, and provide community educational programs regarding issues that affect workers and children.

Implications for Research

A framework of harmony and tension also suggests useful directions for research. Because action research can "contribute to wisdom of practice as we work with people in practical actions which impact their daily lives" (Peterat, 1997, p. 122), it should be used to study educational programs that have a critical stance. A study of educational sites that are struggling to address tensions of child care would help researchers focus on the processes of trying to improve existing reward systems and conditions so they are more in harmony with the social value of child care (Tuominen, 2000).

Interpretive studies are needed to deepen understanding about the motives, practices, values, feelings, and outcomes that play out (Daines, 1989) within a framework of harmony and tension in child care settings. Students could be studied longitudinally for how a sense of harmony changes from schooling to work contexts and how they address tensions over time. A

study of the nature of becoming a reflective participant who is active in the political process of trying to improve conditions within the child care profession would be valuable.

Critical studies should be undertaken to “facilitate a free society where people think and talk together about moral questions that affect society” (Coomer, 1989, p. 168). Child care work and educational environments must be critically assessed for how tensions are identified and addressed within a complex web of power relationships, ideologies, and economic conditions (Strom & Plihal, 1989). Critical studies are needed to explore how child care workers can identify and overcome repressive factors that decrease personal freedom and control of their own situations.

Conclusion

Family and consumer sciences educators are obligated to prepare occupational child care students for an aesthetically meaningful sense of work. This includes helping students harmonize their skills and dreams with the realities of working with children. It also includes helping students critique the harmony and tension both within their particular child care environment and the larger social, political, and economic context. If we are successful, students will achieve personal harmony with their day-to-day work and will embrace the challenge to transform the tensions that affect them.

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About the Authors

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APPENDIX

Respondent Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Educational Status
Ally	20	African American	Vocational-Technical Child Care Program, Full-time
Bette	18	Caucasian	High School Student Enrolled in Vocational Child Care Program, Half-day
Chris	19	African American	Vocational-Technical Child Care Program, Full-time
Darcy	20	Caucasian	Vocational-Technical Child Care Program, Full-time
Errol	20	West Indian	A. A. degree in Elementary Education
Faye	22	West Indian	A. A. degree in Early Childhood Education
Gail	24	Hispanic	A. A. degree in Child Development
Hanna	30	African American	Recently acquired CDA credential. Workshops in conflict resolution, professionalism, etc.
Irene	22	Caucasian	Working on A. A. degree in Child Development at local community college.