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EDITORIAL

Contextualising early childhood education

A critical and constructive postmodern perspective can be a useful tool for contextualising the field of early childhood education. One way this can be done is by situating the seven studies that appear in this issue of AJEC through multiple social, cultural, political, historical, local and global contexts. In doing so, the relationships between these issues are highlighted. Additionally, the ways in which the researchers, participants, settings, data collection strategies, and findings are connected amongst these studies becomes evident. This approach, which does not necessarily imply that the articles should be read in a linear fashion, is about intentionally framing ideas in ways that might generate different understandings about what we do in early childhood and why we do it.

The articles found within this edition of AJEC focus on social issues that are commonly debated and discussed in early childhood education. These issues include poverty, sex education, childcare quality, personal and social skills, repeated viewings of videos, and regulatory frameworks. These issues become more problematic and complex when viewed from various contexts. In doing so, these studies and their findings take on a different set of meanings—making it possible to see how the field of early childhood education is connected, and raising new questions about teaching, learning, and researching.

The cultural contexts of early childhood education and how they influence research is apparent in Lai’s preliminary study. However, if this study of teachers’ perceptions of sex education in Hong Kong preschools were conducted with teachers from South Africa, the United States or Ireland, would it reveal similar findings? Likewise, da Silva and Wise’s study is firmly located within the cultural context of families. This study of parent perspectives on childcare quality focuses on the cultural background of participants as a potential source of difference among parents.

King and Boardman’s study of teachers’ and parents’ insights into the importance of personal and social skills for young children beginning kindergarten is situated within the context of preschool. By locating this study before formal schooling, readiness becomes an important issue for both parents and teachers. Also, by highlighting the different contexts of parents and teachers it becomes possible to see how these participants view the role of early childhood education.

Framing these studies within a professional context illuminates how particular topics or experiences are considered to be either ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ for young children. This perspective places Skouteris & Kelly’s study of repeated-viewing and co-viewing of an animated video with young children into the highly charged political arena of the media.

It is likely that all of these studies would have different findings if they occurred during a different historical period. Interestingly, the research conducted by Taylor brings us back to the Life Chances Study, initiated 12 years ago by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. This longitudinal study explored the impact that family income had on children. Case studies of children show how socioeconomic contexts have influenced their lives for over a decade. Thinking about the historical context raises questions about why some of these issues are relevant now and how they will be of interest to teachers, researchers, policy-makers and families in the future.

Although the gendered context of teaching is prevalent in most of the studies, Hard’s inquiry into how leadership is enacted in early childhood takes on new meanings as she explores how horizontal violence affects professional identity and leadership. Horizontal violence, a concept explored in nursing, has implications for the feminised field of early childhood education. Revisiting Lai’s study from a cultural, professional, and gendered context reveals how participants’ marital status determined the appropriateness of discussing sex education with parents.

Fenech, Sumson, and Goodfellow’s study discusses the regulatory environment in long day care. Through focus groups with early childhood teachers, the local context of their teaching was exposed. In particular, the tensions that these teachers felt regarding their regulatory environment shows how the regulations helped and hindered their work with young children and families.

Contextualising these studies provides new ways for understanding what some may consider common issues in the field of early childhood education. New questions are posed and remind us of the important part that these multiple contexts play in children’s, teachers’ and families’ lives. By failing to recognise these contexts, we lose sight of the complexities of teaching, learning and researching in current times.

Mindy Blaise
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A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SEX EDUCATION IN HONG KONG PRESCHOOLS

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In Hong Kong, once a British colony, sex has traditionally been viewed as taboo and, as such, seldom talked about or openly discussed in public. As a result, there is reluctance on the part of most pre-to-secondary schools to implement sex education. The aim of this preliminary study was to investigate teachers’ perceptions of preschool sex education in Hong Kong. One kindergarten and one childcare centre were selected for this study. Eight preschool teachers were interviewed. The findings indicated that almost all participants lacked the confidence to undertake preschool sex education because they felt that they had inadequate knowledge and skills. Interestingly, the findings showed that the unmarried participants felt embarrassed when talking about sex. Nevertheless, they were willing to take up the responsibilities of the implementation of preschool sex education if they had sufficient training.

Although Hong Kong (HK) was a British colony for more than 150 years and most people grew up under the influence of a Western culture, many people still perceive that the topic of sex should not be discussed publicly. This is because the Chinese have traditionally viewed sex as taboo, and as such, it is a subject seldom talked about or openly discussed in public. This deeply ingrained thinking is a major stumbling block to the implementation of sex education in many HK pre-to-secondary schools.

The imperatives for introducing sex education to children and the situation in Hong Kong

Chinese maintain the belief that ‘children lack the intelligence to understand the mystery surrounding sex’; teachers are therefore reluctant to implement sex education (Lai & Lo, 2004). This belief is constructed by adults who perceive children as passive, innocent and asexual (Gittins, 1998; Robinson, 2005). Most Chinese adults think children should not be exposed to awareness of sex, as they think the psychology of children will be damaged if they are given sex education (Miao, 2001). Under these circumstances, adults apply past standards to the present and future society, hoping that children will continue to be perceived as naïve (Miao, 2001). Children’s voices have been denied and silenced by adults (Robinson, 2005). Consequently, children are seen as vulnerable to child abuse (Miao, 2001).

Moreover, largely because of the conservative Chinese culture, most HK pre-to-secondary schools adopt a passive approach to sex education, and are therefore unwilling to promote it in schools. This may contribute to more cases of sexual abuse. For instance, Against Child Abuse Ltd (ACA) conducted research on the age of the victims of sexual abuse in 2001 in HK (Ta Kung Pao Local News, 2001). The results indicated that the youngest victim was only two years old. A spokesman for ACA announced that the number of incidences of sexual abuse had increased 50 per cent from 1999 to 2003 (Sing Pao Local News, 2004). From another perspective, in 2004 the police reported the statistics of sexual abuse cases of students under the age of 16 over a three-year period (Wen Wei Po Local News, 2004). The findings showed that the number of cases involving sexual abuse had increased 77 per cent from 2001 to 2003.

According to Chen (1997) and Liu (1998), sexual crime is abuse of personal power, which hurts others and/or has a negative effect on their psychological wellbeing. For example, in the cases of sexual abuse at home, the information reveals that most victims are female, and the offenders are usually their close relatives (Ming Pao Local News, 2004). The majority of the offenders are the victims’ fathers, and almost all the abuse takes place in the victims’ homes (Sing Pao Local News, 2004). This reflects that the weaker ones (the daughters) are not respected and are being hurt by the more powerful ones (the fathers) who over-use power in a negative
way and disrupt the functioning of the family. On the other hand, in sexual abuse cases among children, the weaker ones (the younger students) are usually hurt by the more powerful ones (the older students) (Ming Pao Medical website, 2002).

The phenomenon mentioned above indicates that HK society is being affected by pornography (Lai & Lo, 2004), which has over-emphasised sex, and even sexual violence. More and more people misunderstand sexual violence as being rational after reading or viewing pornography (Zhou, 1995). As a result, cases of sexual crime have increased. In other words, the mass media can have a great influence on people's perceptions and judgements (Miao, 2001). It is important to note that sex education can help provide guidelines and moral judgement, and help people to respect others (Miao, 2001). This is because 'a comprehensive sex education could help in attaining personal judgment' (Miao, 2001, pp. 1-11). For instance, according to Guo (1999), in Sweden, sex education is compulsory. Because of this education, the Swedish are able to respect themselves and others, thus sexual crime is not common in the country. In contrast, in the former Soviet Union, where the country did not emphasise sex education, the percentage of sexual crimes is high (Guo, 1999). It appears that, if a society promotes sex education, people's moral values may be better established, the influence of mass media may be less, and the level of sexual crime may reduce. Accordingly, it can be said that sex education indirectly influences the extent of sexual abuse.

Because of the increased number of cases of sexual abuse in HK, teachers realise that sex education should be first implemented in preschools. The rationale for this argument is the fact that the first few years of a person's life are the most important in the formation of their values and behaviours (Oppen, 1996, in Lai & Lo, 2004). Besides, preschoolers are always curious about the body (Lahaye & Lahaye, 1998). Many scholars, both in the West and East, also stress that early childhood is a good period for discussing issues such as sex (Hokuzawa, 1993; Lai & Lo, 2004; Roffman, 2002; Woody, 2002).

**Preschool sex education**

Many scholars such as Lai and Lo (2004), Liu (1998), Miao (2001) and Roffman (2002) indicate that preschool sex education should be a life education. Such education does not just focus on the physical aspect and related knowledge, but also on feelings about oneself and others. It also includes the different roles and responsibilities in families, preschools and societies, in order to understand relationships among people and to learn to respect others. In other words, preschool sex education should include knowledge of physiology, psychology, social culture, and morality. Nowadays, therefore, sex education has been transformed from the narrow sense (i.e. the physical aspects of male and female genders) to the broad sense, that is to teach preschoolers to respect their own life and also the lives of other people (Miao, 2001).

Ideally, parents should be the best candidates for the provision of such enlightenment for their children, taking into account their intimate relationship (Woody, 2002). However, in reality, most offenders of child sexual abuse are the fathers of the victims. This suggests that some parents, especially fathers, do not understand the true nature of sex, which is to respect life; otherwise, they would not use their power to hurt their children. In addition, quite a number of HK parents, under the influence of traditional Chinese culture, still find it difficult to openly discuss sex with their children. Although other parents are open-minded towards sex, and are willing to discuss it with their children, they often have insufficient skills to do so and lack confidence. Under these circumstances, preschools play an important role in transferring such knowledge to small children, in conjunction with parents (Miao, 2001).

Since teachers are crucial for introducing sex education to preschoolers, it is essential to know whether they have the competence, and a positive attitude, to implement such education. This preliminary study is aimed at eliciting the views of eight preschool teachers in HK on preschool sex education. It is hoped that the findings will provide information for the preschools and government to help them find the best ways to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide sex education for preschoolers.

**Methodology**

In this study, a 'purposive random sampling' was adopted to select an unbiased sample of the preschools and participants (Wellington, 2000). One kindergarten (serving preschoolers under three), located in a wealthy area, and one childcare centre (serving preschoolers aged between three and six), located in a lower socioeconomic region, were invited to participate in the study. Both preschools were run by charitable organisations, and subsidised by the government.

To understand teachers' perceptions of preschool sex education, semi-structured in-depth interviews were
employ (Cannold, 2001). The interview schedule comprised two parts, covering the needs and the difficulties of implementing preschool sex education. The responses obtained were coded, with categories for emerging themes then used for analysing and interpreting the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

A total of eight interviewees, consisting of the two preschool heads and six preschool teachers, participated in this study. All participants were female Chinese. Three were married (aged between 26 and 47), the rest were single (aged between 23 and 38). All were trained preschool teachers; seven of them had certificates in early childhood education. The kindergarten principal had a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education. Their teaching experience ranged between three and 25 years.

The limitation of this study can be viewed in terms of the small number of interviewees. Since there is no set rule concerning the number of interviewees (Travers, 2001), even a small number of responses gained from a semi-structured in-depth interview such as this can yield fruitful information (Cohen et al., 2000). Hence the findings from this study remain significant for future research in the area of preschool sex education.

Findings and discussion

Insufficient understanding of preschool sex education

Almost all (seven out of eight) participants had similar views on the term ‘preschool sex education’. As Teacher Yung replied:

Sex education should aim at teaching the children about their body, especially the differences between boy and girl … and letting them know how to protect their private parts. For example, to avoid sexual abuse, our children should learn how to distinguish the best as well as the worst touching.

Only one participant, Principal Au had another view:

...I ... think that sex is about the psychological development of children, that is, to help children understand that different people have different emotions and needs.

It is clear that HK teachers in this study are primarily concerned with teaching preschool sex education from a physiological perspective. Until now, teachers have not been concerned with social, cultural or moral issues. As a consequence, there is evidence that teachers lack a basic understanding of the broader picture of preschool sex education; that is, preschool sex education should be part of life education and should include a focus on social values and relationships.

Similar attitudes towards preschool sex education

Except for one participant, Teacher Hui, who was of the opinion that preschoolers were too young to understand sex, the other participants agreed that sex education was important for preschoolers. As Teacher Li stated:

As you may be aware, sexual abuse cases are gradually increasing. Children should know how to protect themselves from sexual abuse, especially if they have the knowledge of sex appropriate to the stage of early childhood.

In view of this, the participants suggested that preschoolers should learn about sex as early as they could. As Teacher Chan said:

...through learning sex education, our children can understand that sex is good in nature. I am sure that this knowledge can help them grow up happier.

It is critical to point out that seven (out of eight) participants valued sex education as an important foundation education for preschoolers living happy lives in the future (Lai & Lo, 2004). Hence, in order to help provide a happy future for the new generations, sex education should be promoted in preschools.

Preschool sex education should be part of the curriculum

As mentioned before, Teacher Hui thought preschoolers were too immature to understand sex. She disagreed that preschool sex education should form part of the formal curriculum. Nevertheless, the rest of the participants agreed that preschool sex education should be part of the formal curriculum. Preschoolers could then acquire knowledge about sex from a reliable source and, hence, know how to love themselves and others in an appropriate way. As Principal Au said:

Sex is distorted by the negative side of man. This situation should be rectified and corrected, right? So, children should receive sex education from preschool onwards, since the learning of early childhood can influence their development.

It is not a new concept to include sex education in the curriculum, because some educators have advocated that it should be one of the components of school curriculum (Roffman, 2002). It is interesting to note that almost all (seven out of eight) participants did accept sex education as important for preschoolers. However, in fact, sex education is not yet addressed in most preschools.
Feeling embarrassed to talk about sex

Even though most participants agreed that preschool sex education should be implemented, only those who were married felt comfortable discussing this topic with colleagues and parents in order to exchange ideas so as to better implement this program. Those participants who were single felt embarrassed when talking about sex with their colleagues and parents. All of them expressed the view that they were not willing to talk about sex publicly. Teacher Hui said:

I don't think that I am the right person to introduce this topic to parents, as I'm still not married. This topic should be handled by colleagues who are already married and have a child ... I also don't feel good talking about this topic with colleagues because of my state.

The reason the unmarried participants do not feel at ease when talking about sex with colleagues and parents is reflected in the words of Roffman (2002):

Embarrassment connected with talking about sex is not 'normal' and 'natural' in the same way at all, because it is totally a learned response left over from our experience and associations during childhood. (p. 60)

It seems that the traditional Chinese concept of sex as a taboo subject is still deeply embedded in the unmarried teachers’ minds. Some teachers have reached adulthood having missed out on formal sex education. Teachers should receive training on sex education, which may help them break through the traditional thinking. Then they will instill different values about sex in preschoolers’ minds. This helps the preschoolers to know that they should respect themselves and others (Miao, 2001).

Inadequate knowledge and skills for preschool sex education

Parents have a profound influence on their children. If parents have the basic information about sex, the process of preschool sex education will be more effective (Porter, 1995). However, the participants believed that some parents were still conservative and lacked knowledge of sex, which might contribute to a poor collaboration between homes and preschools and hinder the effectiveness of such programs. The participants suggested that parents should receive a basic knowledge of preschool sex education that would help them understand their children’s needs, and also assist them in discussing sex freely with their children. Moreover, they thought that this could minimise the occurrence of sexual abuse of preschoolers. Hence it is meaningful to introduce sex education to parents as well as to preschoolers.

Nevertheless, the participants who were unmarried were not willing to discuss sex with preschoolers and parents candidly and openly. As Teacher Wong argued:

I don’t want to discuss this topic with parents and even the children, because I don’t know this topic very much. Also, I am worried that I might deliver incorrect information of sex to them...

The participants highly recommended that teacher training courses on sex education should be organised either by the government or preschools. They believed they could then use the appropriate language when talking with the preschoolers and parents, and grasp the knowledge and skills to plan and implement appropriate curricula and activities, through participating in such training courses. Such courses could also provide opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas for the implementation of preschool sex education, and thus help to break through psychological barriers. Through attending the training courses, teachers could acquire the skills to develop coherent and developmental preschool sex education, and thus their personal self-awareness, confidence, and competence for the implementation of such programs would also be enhanced (Plant, 1995).

Lack of resources for the implementation of preschool sex education

All participants were concerned that they could not handle the curriculum of preschool sex education well, because of limited resources. As Teacher Li said:

Since I don’t have adequate knowledge of sex, a variety of resources such as story books, toys, etc. can help me to implement its programs. However, as my school has limited money, I wonder whether I have sufficient resources for running the activities.

Hence, the participants urged the government to allocate funding to preschools for the purchase of relevant books, designing and purchasing related teaching aids, and materials to enhance the effectiveness of preschool sex education. Also, they suggested that parental workshops and activities could be organised if the preschools received government funding for the development of sex education. Parents might then alter their attitude towards sex, and be better equipped to discuss sex freely with their children.
Conclusion
The findings of this study indicated that the participants, especially unmarried ones, were still inhibited by their traditional Chinese upbringing and were reluctant to discuss sex. The results also showed that the participants have insufficient knowledge and skills in preschool sex education. However, it is gratifying to note that almost all participants did adopt a positive and progressive attitude on the teaching of sex education, and would like to receive training in effective teaching skills. They believe this will facilitate preschoolers’ acquisition of ‘appropriate’ knowledge of sex as early as possible, so that HK children would be potentially less at risk from adults.

To promote effective sex education, the government is requested to provide funding to preschools for the purpose of purchasing appropriate teaching and learning materials such as books and toys. Also, the government should arrange training workshops on preschool sex education for teachers and parents. This helps teachers and parents to acquire knowledge and skills, and change their attitudes towards preschool sex education. Ultimately, the preschoolers will understand that they should respect themselves and others (Miao, 2001).

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PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDCARE QUALITY AMONG A CULTURALLY DIVERSE SAMPLE

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Traditionally, childcare quality has been defined from a child development perspective. How quality is defined, however, depends on the stakeholder being considered. This paper examines childcare quality from a parent perspective. Information was obtained from 238 Australian parents from culturally diverse backgrounds with children using formal childcare services. The findings suggest that, while developmental features of child care were central to all parents’ concepts of quality, the issues of accessibility, relationships with carers, and sensitivity to cultural background also ranked highly. Some cultural differences were found. Overall, parents perceived that their childcare arrangement matched the quality features they considered important. However, this differed according to parent culture, with Somali parents most likely and Vietnamese parents least likely to report that their childcare arrangement matched the quality features they considered important. The research, policy and practice implications are discussed.

Introduction

A substantial body of research has demonstrated the critical influence of childcare quality on a range of developmental outcomes (see Ochiltree, 1994, and Vandell, 2004, for a review). Researchers typically assess childcare quality from a child development perspective, adopting indicators of health and safety and developmentally appropriate care in their measures (Farquhar, 1993). While researcher perspectives on childcare quality tend to dominate the literature, this focus is somewhat limited, as quality is a subjective construct (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002). Other stakeholders, such as staff and parents, may conceptualise quality differently, depending on their beliefs about child development and the objectives of child care.

Historically, childcare quality has been defined by standards for accreditation, state licensing and researchers’ assessment of the developmental effects of child care. Therefore, definitions tend to interpret quality as what is ‘developmentally appropriate’. However, who defines quality and thus how it is defined (e.g. Moss & Pence, 1994) is currently under debate. Indeed, much of the relevant literature suggests that the definition of quality is uncertain (Farquhar, 1993; Wangmann, 1995). Childcare quality typically relates to subjective values and beliefs about children and their development (Farquhar, 1993; Friedman, Randolph, & Kochanoff, 2001; Moss, 1994; Pence & Moss, 1994), and, as such, is dependent on the stakeholder being considered (Moss, 1994). Measures of quality currently adopted by researchers reflect a developmental psychology perspective. Measures used in accreditation processes and research typically include structural characteristics such as carer-to-child ratios and carer education, because they are easy to assess (Farquhar, 1993). However, such definitions may not address aspects of child care that are viewed to be important by other significant stakeholders.

An appreciation of different perspectives will extend the definition of childcare quality (Farquhar, 1990b), which is important for the formulation of childcare policies and services that satisfy a range of stakeholder interests (Powell, 1997). The practice implications of adopting a broader perspective on quality are highlighted by Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002), who suggest ‘if parents who have recently immigrated from Somalia define quality child care in terms of providers that speak Somali and observe Muslim eating customs, then programs could be developed to fit the families’ definitions of quality while also conforming to traditional definitions of quality’ (p. 91).

The Child Care in Cultural Context (CCICC) study (Wise & Sanson, 2000) provides an opportunity to explore parent perspectives. The CCICC study involved parents from Anglo, Somali and Vietnamese cultural backgrounds whose children were using centre-based care or family day care in metropolitan Melbourne. The current paper explores perceptions of childcare quality among these three cultural groups.

Parents define quality in relation to the needs of their child and family (Emlen, Koren & Schultze, 1999), and focus on the
childcare service overall (including features such as cost) in addition to the setting in which the child spends their time (Powell, 1997). It is therefore likely that parent perceptions of quality may differ from researcher perspectives (Larner & Phillips, 1994), and the available empirical evidence suggests that this is the case (e.g. Farquhar, 1993). Broadly, Cegłowski and Bacigalupa (2002) suggest that the most important aspects of child care for parents are health and safety, personal characteristics of the staff, parent–carer communication and flexibility of provision.

Although most parents rate all aspects of child care as important to some degree (e.g. Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Cryer, Tietze & Wessels, 2002; Farquhar, 1993), when parents are asked to rate features of child care in order of importance they typically rank the emotional warmth of care as the most important (Browne Miller, 1990; Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Farquhar, 1993). However, Sonestein (1991) found that, for a sample of mothers receiving welfare, emotional warmth was not as important as care that was available when children were sick, was clean and safe, reliable and dependable, affordable, and had adequate adult supervision.

A more recent study of parent perspectives, the Oregon Child Care Research Department study (Emlen et al., 1999), derived a measure of quality from a parent perspective. It contained scales reflecting emotional warmth, the physical environment, staff skills, communication, caregiver support, high-risk care (e.g. care that is not safe or healthy), safety and security, and the social environment. Parents in this study also stressed the importance of flexibility, suggesting that parents choose a childcare setting that matches their particular circumstances and needs.

**Differences in perspectives among parents**

Parents may view childcare quality differently according to their age, cultural background and socioeconomic status, as well as the age and gender of their children. This paper focuses on cultural background as a potential source of difference among parents.

Parenting beliefs, styles, and developmental expectations are known to differ by cultural background (Harkness & Super, 2002). The likelihood of cultural differences in parents’ preferred childcare characteristics is therefore high. Farquhar (1993) examined Paheka (white) and non-Paheka parents in New Zealand and found that qualified staff and positive behaviour management were most important to Paheka parents, while non-Paheka parents placed more importance on biculturalism, non-sexist curriculum, outings and excursions, parental involvement in decision-making, and provisions for parents. Farquhar suggests, ‘these findings underscore the argument that how quality is defined is affected by cultural beliefs…’ (1993, p. 138). By contrast, Cryer, Tietze and Wessels (2002) compared North American and German parents on their preferred childcare characteristics and found parents in both countries ranked each characteristic approximately the same.

Using data from the CCICC study, parent perspectives on childcare quality are examined in this paper. The specific research questions addressed here are:

1. What are parents’ preferred childcare characteristics and do these vary by cultural background?
2. Do parents’ arrangements match their preferred childcare characteristics and does the extent of ‘match’ vary by cultural background?

**Method**

**Participants**

The CCICC study included information from 238 parents (230 mothers and eight fathers) of children who were aged from two to 69 months (M=27.6 months, SD=13.9). Of the 238 parents, 84 were identified as Anglo, 67 as Somali, and 66 as Vietnamese. An additional 21 parents were of other non-Anglo backgrounds. Given their small group size, these parents were not included in cultural comparisons. Data was collected by questionnaire. Vietnamese and Somali parents were able to complete the questionnaires in their own language, with the assistance of a Vietnamese or Somali research assistant if required. In terms of childcare use, 137 children were using centre-based care and 91 were using family day care. An additional 10 children were using informal care only (care by relatives or family friends). For a detailed description of the sampling strategy, readers are referred to Wise and Sanson (2000).

**Measures**

To assess parent perspectives on quality, a quantitative measure of 20 features of child care was specifically developed for the current study. The features fitted into one of four domains: (i) responsiveness to developmental needs (e.g. nurturing); (ii) accessibility (e.g. cost); (iii) carer relationships with the child and parents (e.g. parenting support); and (iv) responsiveness to the child’s cultural background (e.g. use of child’s language) (see Appendix). The ‘responsiveness to developmental needs’ domain represented the dominant researcher perspective on childcare quality, while the ‘accessibility’ and ‘carer relationships’ domains reflected aspects of care found to be important for parents (e.g. Emlen et al., 1999). The final
domain, ‘responsiveness to the child’s cultural background’, was thought to be particularly important given the culturally diverse nature of the participants in the CCICC study, which is thought to be one of only a few studies to examine the importance to parents of culturally specific aspects of care.

Parents were asked to respond to the items in two ways. First, they were asked to indicate how important each of the features was to them, using a three-point scale where 1 indicated not at all important, 2 indicated somewhat important, and 3 indicated very important. Second, parents were asked to indicate how well their current childcare arrangement satisfied each feature, also using a three-point scale where 1 indicated not at all well, 2 indicated somewhat well, and 3 indicated very well.

Data analysis
All data was entered into a spreadsheet and analyses were undertaken using SPSS 10 (Mac). For each quality item, the percentage of responses for each of the three options was calculated. Chi-square analysis was used to examine cultural differences in responses. For these analyses, response categories on the ‘how important’ items were collapsed into a dichotomous variable, indicating not very important (ratings of 1 and 2) and very important (ratings of 3).

Results
Parents’ preferred childcare characteristics
To demonstrate how important each of the childcare features was to parents, items were ranked, with a ranking of 1 indicating that, overall, this feature was of least

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Rankings and distribution of responses for parental importance of childcare features (n=238)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness to developmental needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer training and education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulating toys and materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer–child ratios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability of carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer relationships with the child and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer knowledge of child and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual child-focused program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding parents’ ideas and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness to the child’s cultural background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care similar to child’s home environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child’s home environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of child’s language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration of important festivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of food from child’s culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴ 1=least important, 20=most important.
NB. Because of missing data, percentages do not always add up to 100.
importance and a ranking of 20 indicating that this feature was of most importance. These rankings are presented in Table 1 within quality domains, in order of highest to lowest ranked. The distribution of responses is also shown.

Table 1 indicates that all features of child care were at least somewhat important to most parents. Nurturing had the highest percentage of ‘very important’ ratings, followed closely by safety and health. Availability of food from the child’s culture had the lowest percentage of ‘very important’ ratings.

**Cultural differences in parents’ preferred childcare characteristics**

Chi-square analysis was used to determine whether the proportion of parents who rated aspects of child care as ‘very important’ was independent of culture. The proportion of ‘very important’ ratings are presented in Table 2.

For the domain of ‘responsiveness to developmental needs’, several item responses were not independent of culture, including carer training and education ($\chi^2=7.19, p<.05$), stability of carers ($\chi^2=11.24, p<.01$), learning activities ($\chi^2=6.31, p<.05$), safety and health ($\chi^2=8.53, p<.05$) and nutrition ($\chi^2=7.17, p<.05$). Vietnamese parents were least likely to rate carer training and education and carer stability as very important, but were most likely to rate learning activities as very important. Somali parents were least likely to rate safety and health as very important, whereas Anglo parents were least likely to rate nutrition as very important.

Results also indicated that responses to ‘accessibility’ items were not independent of culture. Anglo parents were least

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality domain</th>
<th>Anglo (n=84)</th>
<th>Vietnamese (n=66)</th>
<th>Somali (n=67)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness to developmental needs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and health</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>91.0</td>
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<td>Carer training and education</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>98.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Stimulating toys and materials</td>
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<td>90.9</td>
<td>95.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
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<td>92.4</td>
<td>94.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
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<td>95.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carer–child ratios</td>
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<td>80.3</td>
<td>83.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stability of carers</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessibility</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in hours</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>75.0</td>
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<td>86.6</td>
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<td><strong>Carer relationships with the child and parents</strong></td>
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<td>Carer knowledge of child and parents</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>92.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual child-focused program</td>
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<td>63.6</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Understanding parents’ ideas and practices</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>64.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting support</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness to the child’s cultural background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care similar to child’s home environment</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>86.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child’s home environment</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of child’s language</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration of important festivals</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of food from child’s culture</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>73.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
likely to rate location \((x^2=15.54, p<.001)\) and flexibility in hours \((x^2=8.37, p<.05)\) as very important, although the proportion of Anglo parents who rated these aspects as very important was nonetheless high (71.4% and 89.3%, respectively).

Cultural differences were also found in parents’ responses to ‘carer relationships with the child and parents’ items. While approximately 80 per cent of Vietnamese parents rated parenting support as very important, this only applied to about 30 per cent of Anglo and Somali parents respectively \((x^2=43.50, p<.001)\). Somali parents were most likely to rate individual child-focused program \((x^2=20.16, p<.001)\) and carer knowledge of child and parents \((x^2=21.58, p<.001)\) as very important, whereas Vietnamese parents were least likely to do so.

Responses to ‘responsiveness to the child’s cultural background’ items also varied by culture. Somali parents were considerably more likely than both Anglo and Vietnamese parents to rate knowledge of the child’s home environment \((x^2=11.68, p<.01)\), celebration of important festivals \((x^2=78.41, p<.001)\), and the availability of food from the child’s culture \((x^2=53.38, p<.001)\), as very important.

### Match between parental importance and parent ratings

**Parent ratings of their childcare arrangement**

The proportion of all parents who rated aspects of their child’s child care as being ‘very well met’, ‘somewhat well met’ and ‘not at all well met’ are presented in Table 3. Within each quality domain, items are shown from highest to lowest rated. These statistics indicate that, for most features of care, the majority of parents rated their childcare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality domain</th>
<th>Very well met %</th>
<th>Somewhat well met %</th>
<th>Not at all well met %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness to developmental needs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and health</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carer training and education</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating toys and materials</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer–child ratios</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability of carers</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessibility</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in hours</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carer relationships with the child and parents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer knowledge of child and parents</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual child-focused program</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding parents’ ideas and practices</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting support</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness to the child’s cultural background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of child’s language</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child’s home environment</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care similar to child’s home environment</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration of important festivals</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of food from child’s culture</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NB.** Because of missing data, percentages do not always add up to 100.
arrangement as meeting that feature very well, and parents rarely rated a feature as being not at all well met.

**Match between importance and ratings**

The analyses in this section were conducted to determine whether parents thought they were receiving care that fitted with what they thought to be important in a childcare setting. To determine whether there was a match between parents’ ratings of the importance of each characteristic and how they rated their current childcare arrangement, discrepancy scores were created by subtracting parents’ ratings of ‘how important’ the feature was to them from their rating of ‘how well met’ their child care satisfied the feature.

Discrepancy values ranging from 0 to 2 indicate the extent to which parents valued that aspect of child care was less than (or equal to) how well they felt that aspect of child care was actually met. Negative values indicated that the extent to which parents valued that aspect of child care was greater than how well they felt that aspect of child care was actually met.

A dichotomous variable was subsequently constructed from these data, indicating a ‘match’ between how important and how well met (discrepancy values $\geq 0$, indicating meeting or exceeding expectations) or a ‘non-match’ between how important and how well met (negative discrepancy values, indicating expectations not met).

Table 4 shows the proportion of cases where importance values matched actual ratings for the total sample. For each domain, items are shown in order of highest to lowest per cent of match. These results suggest that the majority of parents were using a childcare arrangement that matched their ratings of importance (range: 77.3 to 94.8 per cent). Although crude, these results give us some indication of parent satisfaction, with the assumption that parents who perceive their childcare arrangement to match what is important to them are likely to be satisfied with their arrangement.

**Match according to cultural background**

Chi-square analysis was used to examine whether the proportion of cases where importance and actual ratings matched was independent of culture. Results are shown in Table 5.

In respect of all eight of the ‘responsiveness to developmental needs’ quality items, the proportion of matched responses was not independent of culture. Somali parents were most likely to report a match between importance and actual ratings, and Vietnamese parents were least likely (safety and health, $x(2)=18.01, p<.001$; carer education and training, $x(2)=22.47, p<.001$; nutrition, $x(2)=13.26, p<.001$; nurturing, $x(2)=36.68, p<.001$; stability of carers, $x(2)=16.56, p<.001$; stimulating toys and materials, $x(2)=24.19, p<.001$; carer–child ratios, $x(2)=26.45, p<.001$; and learning activities, $x(2)=51.13, p<.001$).

Somali parents were again most likely to report a match between importance and actual ratings in relation to accessibility. The greatest proportion of matched responses was found for Somali parents on both cost ($x(2)=19.05, p<.001$) and flexibility in hours ($x(2)=7.58, p<.05$) items.

Similarly, Somali parents were most likely to report a match on all carer relationships quality items, and Vietnamese parents were least likely to report a match (parenting support, $x(2)=36.62, p<.001$; carer knowledge of child and parents, $x(2)=16.81, p<.001$; child-focused program, $x(2)=25.61, p<.001$; and understanding parents’ ideas and practices, $x(2)=30.56, p<.001$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Proportion of cases where importance and actual ratings match</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness to developmental needs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stability of carers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulating toys and materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer–child ratios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessibility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carer relationships with the child and parents</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td>Parenting support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carer knowledge of child and parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual child-focused program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding parents’ ideas and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness to the child’s cultural background</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of food from child’s culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of child’s language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Celebration of important festivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child’s home environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care similar to child’s home environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, Somali parents were again most likely to report a match between importance and ratings for cultural responsiveness, although the rates of matched responses for Anglo parents were also high. Vietnamese parents were least likely to report a match on these items (use of child’s language, x(2)=1.74, p<.01; celebration of important festivals, x(2)=8.07, p<.05; knowledge of the child’s home environment, x(2)=37.22, p<.001; availability of food from child’s culture, x(2)=6.82, p<.05; and care similar to child’s home environment, x(2)=47.00, p<.001).

Discussion
The first aim of this paper was to explore parent perceptions of childcare quality. The findings indicated that, overall, all the features of child care examined were of at least some importance to parents in the current study. This is consistent with previous research (e.g. Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Kontos, Howes, Shinn & Galinsky, 1995).

Table 5. Frequency of match between importance and actual ratings by culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality domain</th>
<th>Anglo (n=84)</th>
<th>Match (%)</th>
<th>Vietnamese (n=66)</th>
<th>Match (%)</th>
<th>Somali (n=67)</th>
<th>Match (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness to developmental needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and health</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>98.5</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer training and education</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>98.4</td>
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<td>Stimulating toys and materials</td>
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<td>Nutrition</td>
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<td>98.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
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<td>Carer–child ratios</td>
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<td>Stability of carers</td>
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<td>81.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in hours</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>97.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carer knowledge of child and parents</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual child-focused program</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding parents’ ideas and practices</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting support</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness to the child’s cultural background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care similar to child’s home environment</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child’s home environment</td>
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<td>64.6</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of child’s language</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>98.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration of important festivals</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of food from child’s culture</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also consistent with previous literature was the finding that parents rated nurturing as the most important feature of child care (e.g. Browne Miller, 1990; Farquhar, 1993), with other aspects of care, including accessibility, considered of secondary importance (see Powell, 1997).

Analyses of parents’ preferred childcare characteristics indicated that Anglo parents were slightly less likely than other parents in the sample to rate accessibility items as very important. The proportion of parents who rated cost as very important, however, was roughly the same across cultural groups. Vietnamese parents were far more likely than other parents in the sample to rate parenting support as very important, although Vietnamese parents were least likely to rate other aspects of carer relationships as very important. Somali parents were most likely to rate cultural responsiveness aspects as very important, whereas Vietnamese parents were far
less likely to rate these items as very important. The relative length of time in Australia of these two cultural groups (Somalis being relatively new arrivals), and corresponding differences in attitudes to acculturation and the role of child care in promoting acculturation, may explain this finding.

Although it is unclear whether these attitudes extend to parents beyond the current sample, results suggest that the extent to which parents value different aspects of child care may vary by cultural background. Providers may therefore need to consider the possibility of cultural variations in parents’ expectations of childcare services, which calls for good information exchange and cooperation between parents and carers. Importantly, differences between Somali and Vietnamese parents’ attitudes towards the importance of cultural responsiveness in child care suggests there may be significant variation across ‘non-Anglo’ cultural groups about the extent to which parents require childcare services to match the cultural setting of the home.

The second aim here was to determine whether the qualities of parents’ childcare arrangements matched their preferred childcare characteristics. In general, parents rated their childcare arrangement highly and reported that it matched their preferred characteristics. This is consistent with much of the previous research (e.g. Browne Miller, 1990; Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Cryer et al., 2002).

Cultural differences were found in rates of match, however. In general, Somali responses were most likely to match, whereas responses of Vietnamese parents were most likely to be discrepant, suggesting lower levels of satisfaction with their childcare arrangements. The fact that all Somali children attending family day care in the current sample were looked after by a family member or a member of the broader Somali community (n=45) might help explain the high-level of satisfaction among this cultural group. Previous analyses of the CCICC data (Hand & Wise, 2006) have shown a high level of cooperation between parents and carers of Somali children, and similarity in parenting values and behaviours between parents and carers as well, which could also explain Somali parents’ satisfaction with their childcare arrangements.

The finding here that most parents reported their childcare arrangement to have the features they rated to be important is encouraging, although the fact that the qualities of childcare that Vietnamese parents rate as important were not always reflected in their choice of childcare arrangements suggests that carers may need to go out of their way to understand the expectations of parents from diverse cultural groups.

Conclusions and implications
Given that the current sample was not randomly selected, the findings cannot be generalised. However, the study does provide new information about parent perspectives on quality, and suggests that there may be variation among cultural groups on this issue. This paper has shown that, along with childcare characteristics deemed to be important from a research perspective, parents place importance on other aspects such as accessibility, relationships with carers and cultural responsiveness. This suggests the importance of reflecting parents’ expectations in policy development and service improvement. Research is also needed to determine whether the additional domains of quality that parents consider important, such as carer relationships and cultural responsiveness, have developmental consequences.

It has been suggested that the current lack of consideration regarding parents’ perceptions of childcare quality in policy and service development is because of the belief that parents do not recognise good-quality child care (Farquhar, personal communication, 1/12/04; Sonestein, 1991). However, parents here rated all aspects of child care as being very important to some degree, including aspects thought to reflect researcher definitions of quality. In choosing a childcare service, parents seek additional features to those defined by policies and researchers. Engaging with parents is therefore important for service delivery that meets parents’ requirements.

Disclaimer
The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and may not reflect the views of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to acknowledge and thank Associate Professor Ann Sanson, University of Melbourne, for her considerable input to the development of the study and for her ongoing support and counsel throughout. In addition, Kelly Hand, Lan Vuong and Farhia Mohumed made significant contributions to the field work components of the study. The authors also thank the study participants for their contribution to this research.

References


Appendix

Responsiveness to developmental needs

- There are a large number of carers for the number of children (carer–child ratios)
- The carers are well-trained and qualified (carer training and education)
- The care is warm and sensitive (nurturing)
- The child is cared for by the same person each day (carer stability)
- The program has activities to help children learn new things (learning activities)
- The childcare setting is a safe and healthy place for the child (safety and health)
- Children are provided with good-quality food (nutrition)
- There are plenty of stimulating toys and materials for the child (stimulating toys and materials)

Location, cost and flexibility of care

- The cost of care is affordable (cost)
- The child care is conveniently located (location)
- Care is available during hours it is needed (flexibility in hours)

Carer relationships with the child and parents

- Carers provide support and advice to parents to help them with child-rearing (parenting support)
- Carers take time to understand parents’ ideas and practices about bringing up children (understanding parents’ ideas and practices)
- Carers will adapt the program to fit particular children’s needs (individual child-focused program)
- Carers know the child and his/her parents well (carer knowledge of child and parents)

Responsiveness to the child’s cultural background

- Carers talk to the child in his/her own language (use of child’s language)
- Carers are sensitive to differences between home and child care in ways of bringing up children (knowledge of child’s home environment)
- Important festivals and holidays from the child’s culture are celebrated (celebration of important festivals)
- The child is given food s/he is used to at home (availability of food from child’s culture)
- The child is treated much the same way as at home (care similar to child’s home environment)
WHAT PERSONAL/SOCIAL SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN COMMENCING KINDERGARTEN? 
Exploring teachers’ and parents’ insights

Patricia King
Department of Education, Tasmania

Margot Boardman
University of Tasmania

This article reports on a study that investigated the importance of children possessing personal/social skills when starting kindergarten, from teachers’ and parents’ perspectives. The study involved a sample of 16 kindergarten teachers and 63 parents of kindergarten children from government schools in one of the six education districts within the Tasmanian Department of Education. Data was collected through mailed questionnaires, which utilised 22 personal/social skills sourced from the Early Social Skills brochure (Department of Education, 2002a) and the Kindergarten Development Check (Department of Education, 2003). Results from the study support the importance of socially preparing children for the kindergarten environment, with emphasis being placed upon children commencing kindergarten with many of the specified personal/social skills. It was revealed that there was a lack of congruence between teachers’ and parents’ perceptions in respect of some items, in the areas of ‘attitude to learning’ and ‘social communication’. This indicates that there may be inconsistent expectations between home and school which have the potential to impact negatively upon a child’s personal/social development.

Introduction

We live in a society where our social systems are rapidly changing; and thus it is essential for children to develop social competence skills with the potential to enable them to live fulfilling lives, to shape their personal futures, and to make wise life choices (Department of Education, 2002b). Recent research has revealed that children’s social skills are essential for school and employment success and peer acceptance (Elkinson & Elkinson, 2000; Masten & Coatworth, 1998; Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997). Research has also indicated that children who lack personal/social skills can display a variety of problems, ranging from social withdrawal, shyness and isolation, to aggression and anti-social behaviour (Herbert, 1997). Additionally, deficiencies in social skills have been shown to be an effective predictor of poor academic performance (because learning is impeded by noncompliant and uncontrolled behaviour), as well as social maladjustment and peer rejection in adolescence and adulthood (Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 2000; Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997).

Entering school for the first time at kindergarten is a milestone in children’s lives (Dockett & Perry, 2003) and various social skills have been identified as important for children to possess when starting school. The Tasmanian Department of Education (2002a) recommends that children be able to complete a number of social skills when commencing kindergarten, including: manage own belongings, toilet on own, wash and dry own hands, follow rules and routines, persevere to finish a task, cooperate with other children, take turns, express feelings and emotions, ask questions when they do not understand, try new things they are not sure about, and accept feedback from an adult on their learning or behaviour. However, what is not clear from previous research is who should undertake the responsibility for ensuring kindergarten children develop these social skills. Page, Nienhuys, Kapsalakis and Morda (2001) contend that the home and the school have been recognised as having the most influence over children’s development, with Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren and Soderman (2006) explaining that the more similar the expectations, perceptions and practices are between the home and school, then the easier it is for children to adapt their behaviour accordingly. It was subsequently seen as important to investigate the notion of socially preparing children for kindergarten within a Tasmanian setting, and to acknowledge the views of
both kindergarten teachers and parents in this debate. Thus, this study aimed to reveal which social skills kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergarten children perceived as important for young children to possess when commencing kindergarten, and to ascertain the similarities and differences between the teachers’ and parents’ perceptions on this matter.

Method
The sample consisted of kindergarten teachers (n=16) and parents (n=63) who had a child attending kindergarten. Participants were from government schools from one of the six education districts within the Tasmanian Department of Education. All kindergarten teachers were asked to randomly select six parents of children in their class and invite them to be involved in the study.

Data was gathered through mailed questionnaires, as this was seen as an effective means of gathering detailed information from participants with maximum ease and within a timely framework (Burns, 2000). The return rate for the questionnaires was 76 per cent of teachers (n=16) and 50 per cent of parents (n=63). A Likert method rating scale was utilised in the questionnaires. Three fixed alternatives of not very important, important and very important were given, in which participants were required to select one alternative closest to their own position (Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991). Questionnaire items consisted of 22 social skills, derived from a combination of two sources. In the first instance, items were based on recommendations by the Department of Education (2002a) in their Early Social Skills brochure as to the social skills children may need when commencing school. Second, the personal and social behaviour markers in the Kindergarten Development Check (Department of Education, 2003) were also used and influenced the statements used within the questionnaire. To assist in the analysis of the data, the personal/social skills were categorised into the following five sections: Personal Independence, Attitude to Learning, Social Communication, Social Interaction with Peers, and Behaviour.

Data was analysed by a process that Punch (2003) describes as ‘progressively summarising and “distilling” the data to arrive in the end at substantive conclusions’ (p. 65). Each set of information from the questionnaires was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, where it was summarised allowing percentages to be calculated. Additionally, teacher and parent responses were assigned a numerical value of 1 to 3 according to the response category specified. These values were: not very important=1, important=2, very important=3; and from this data mean scores were calculated for each of the provided 22 personal/social skills, with higher mean scores (2–3) denoting strong agreement of that participant group to the stated personal/social skill. Further statistical analysis of the data was undertaken using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), where one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for significant differences between teachers’ and parents’ responses. This process was seen to provide a higher degree of confidence in the results provided (Burns, 2000). Additionally, some participants made anecdotal notes on questionnaires, which were used as support for the results.

Results
Results from the Kindergarten Parent Questionnaire and the Kindergarten Teacher Questionnaire are based upon parents’ and teachers’ responses to three fixed alternatives on a Likert scale. Parents and teachers indicated their perceptions about the importance of children being able to perform specific personal/social skills before they commence kindergarten as: not very important, important or very important.

Parents and teachers appear to have similar views regarding the level of importance of children possessing Personal Independence skills when they start kindergarten. The majority of teachers and parents indicated it to be either important or very important for children to have the specified personal independence skills, with 88 per cent of teachers and 71 per cent of parents indicating that it was very important for children to be able to go to the toilet on their own when they start kindergarten. Furthermore, it was also considered by 63 per cent of teachers and 62 per cent of parents to be very important for children to be able to wash and dry their own hands when they start kindergarten.

Table 1 shows that five of the six Attitude to Learning skills were identified as very important by a higher percentage of parents than teachers. In relation to the skill of children being prepared to play/work by themselves, 20 per cent of teachers perceived this skill to be not very important for children to have when they start kindergarten, while 92 per cent of parents believed this skill to be important or very important. Waiting for a turn was identified by the majority of parents (64%) as being very important, and by the majority of teachers (63%) as being important. A higher percentage of teachers perceived children keeping
going to finish something they have started, persevering in difficult tasks, and trying new things they are not sure about, as not very important, compared to parents who viewed these skills to be very important or important.

When the importance of children’s Social Communication skills from parents’ and teachers’ perceptions were compared it was found that the majority of teachers (63%) and parents (73%) perceived it to be very important for children to be able to use words rather than physical aggression to solve problems when they start school, with no teachers or parents identifying it to be not very important. However, the majority of teachers perceived it to be important for children to be able to ask questions when they do not understand (75%) and use ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ without prompting (56%), while the majority of parents perceived these skills to be very important (56% and 66% respectively).

In the category Social Interaction with Peers, the items ‘sharing equipment with others’, ‘showing concern for others’ and ‘talking to other children in the group’ were perceived by the majority of parents to be very important, while the majority of teachers perceived these skills to be important. A lower percentage of teachers, compared to parents, indicated each of the skills to be very important, suggesting that parents

### Table 1. Teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of importance of personal/social skills prior to kindergarten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal/social skills required for kindergarten</th>
<th>Not Very Important Teacher %</th>
<th>Not Very Important Parent %</th>
<th>Important Teacher %</th>
<th>Important Parent %</th>
<th>Very Important Teacher %</th>
<th>Very Important Parent %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Independence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes to toilet on own</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manages own belongings</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washes and dries own hands</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude to Learning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks for assistance with a difficult task</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps going to finish something started</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseveres in difficult tasks</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepared to play/work alone</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries new things not sure about</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waits for turn</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks question when does not understand</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sits and listens to adult for 5 minutes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks about own feelings</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks to known adults</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses ‘please’ and ‘thank you’; no prompts</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses words to solve problems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Interaction with Peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joins in activities with others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares equipment with others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows concern for others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks to other children in the group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviour</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts correction regarding behaviour</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does as requested by adults</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
perceived these skills to be more important for children to have when they start kindergarten, than teachers did.

There was general consensus between teacher and parent respondents concerning the importance of children’s possession of appropriate Behaviour skills when commencing kindergarten. The majority of teachers and parents perceived it to be very important for children to be able to accept correction regarding their behaviour (63% and 64% respectively) and do as requested by adults (56% and 71% respectively) when starting kindergarten.

### Table 2. Mean scores and ANOVA results of teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of importance of personal/social skills prior to kindergarten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal/social skills required for kindergarten</th>
<th>Teacher Mean</th>
<th>Parent Mean</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Independence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes to toilet on own</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manages own belongings</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>.785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washes and dries own hands</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>.699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude to Learning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks for assistance with a difficult task</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps going to finish something started</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseveres in difficult tasks</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>.005**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepared to play/work alone</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries new things not sure about</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>.006**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waits for turn</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>.008**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks question when does not understand</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sits and listens to adult for at least five minutes</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks about own feelings</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks to known adults</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses ‘please’ and ‘thank you’; no prompts</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses words, not aggression, to solve problems</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Interaction with Peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps others</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joins in activities with others</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares equipment with others</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.020*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows concern for others</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.016*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks to other children in the group</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.004**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviour</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts correction regarding behaviour</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>.618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does as requested by adults</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>.249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes significance at \( p < .050 \)
** denotes significance at \( p < .010 \)

Mean scores calculated for all personal/social skills items showed that, overall, parents placed higher levels of importance on personal/social skills for children commencing kindergarten, when compared to the teachers in the study. Only two personal/social skills returned lower mean scores from parents’ responses; these items were ‘manages own belongings’ and ‘prepared to work/play alone’. Congruence of views was evident between teachers’ and parents’ responses in the key areas of Personal Independence and Behaviour.

When statistical analysis of the results was completed, employing one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA),...
significant differences in opinions between teachers and parents in 10 of the 22 personal/social skills were revealed. These significant differences were in three of the key areas of social skills utilised in this research, Attitude to Learning, Social Communication and Social Interaction with Peers. Eight of the skills had significance levels above p<.01 (shown in Table 2) and included four skills in the Attitude to Learning area, three skills from the Social Communication area and one Social Interaction with Peers skill. In these results it is clear that parents held significantly higher expectations of their children possessing the specified social skills prior to starting kindergarten than did teachers in this study.

Discussion
This study raises some issues for both kindergarten teachers and parents of young children commencing kindergarten, regarding which personal/social skills are important for a child to possess for a successful start to schooling.

Commonalities in the opinions of teachers and parents regarding personal/social skills needed for kindergarten
Teachers’ and parents’ views on children’s possession of personal/social skills before commencing kindergarten was highlighted in the study, with the majority identifying each of the 22 social skills as being either important, or very important. This is consistent with research undertaken by Lockwood and Fleet (1999), in that possessing social skills was highly valued for children when starting school. These results also suggest that the teachers and parents involved in the study agree with the Department of Education (2002a) that there is a need to prepare children personally and socially for the kindergarten environment.

Both teachers and parents placed importance upon children’s possession of Personal Independence skills when commencing kindergarten, which is in agreement with the Department of Education’s (2002a) expectations. Additionally, a child being able to go to the toilet independently appears to be the skill that both parents and teachers believe to be of the greatest importance, which is consistent with previous research findings (Johnson, Gallagher, Cook & Wong, 1995) that showed teachers perceived this to be the most critical skill to possess when starting school. Teachers and parents had similar expectations of children possessing the two Behaviour skills when commencing kindergarten. This result needs to be acknowledged as an important foundation for the development of collaboration between teachers and parents, and in turn implies ’a shared responsibility for the care and education of young children’ (Porter, 2003, p. 59).

Results also suggest that some teachers and parents may be placing too much importance upon children being able to complete some personal/social skills when starting kindergarten. It needs to be stated that several of the personal/social skills perceived as important by participants in this study (sharing, showing concern for others, using words rather than aggression to solve problems, keeping going to finish something started, and persevering in difficult tasks) have previously been recognised as not typical behaviours of four-year-old children (Kostelnik et al., 2006; Seefeldt & Wasik, 2002). This leaves a concern about some of the expectations outlined in the Early Social Skill brochure (Department of Education, 2002a) which is circulated to pre-kindergarten settings within Tasmania, as some of the skills specified have not been identified as age appropriate (King, 2003).

Differences in the opinions of teachers and parents regarding social skills needed for kindergarten
Conversely, there were a number of skills where parents and teachers held differing views regarding the importance of a specific skill for children commencing kindergarten. Parents perceived it to be more important than did teachers for children to be able to complete all of the specified personal/social skills when starting kindergarten, suggesting that parents have higher expectations of their child being personally/socially competent than do teachers. Alternatively, parents may be concerned with the impact that the transition from home to school has on their child, so, in accordance with Johnson et al. (1995), believe that ensuring their child has a repertoire of personal/social skills prior to starting kindergarten will make the transition easier and less stressful. Parents appear to have a much higher expectation than teachers regarding basic manners. It is contended that, in general, parents start to teach their child to use ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ from when the child begins to talk, and therefore expect the child to have acquired this skill before starting kindergarten. On the other hand, some teachers appear to consider that children will develop this skill as their confidence grows through the social interactions with peers within the kindergarten environment. This research reveals that
some teachers (25%) failed to see the importance of children possessing basic manners when commencing kindergarten, while the majority of parents (66%) indicated this to be very important. This social skill also returned a statistically significant result which would appear to indicate a lack of congruence between the expectations of the home and the school, which has the potential to be a source of confusion for the young child.

Parents placed a higher emphasis than teachers did upon children possessing skills relating to interaction with peers when starting kindergarten. It is suggested that parents have a good idea of how their child interacts with known others, given that many children will have been regularly involved with one or more groups of peers prior to schooling, through church, exercise and/or care situations, resulting in parents’ belief that their child is competent in social interactions. However, commencing kindergarten involves children engaging with many unknown others. Therefore, teachers observe the young child coming to a new situation at kindergarten, with new adults and new peers. Thus it could be argued that teachers are able to provide a more accurate picture of the actual level of social competence a child demonstrates when commencing kindergarten. This could explain why teachers place less importance on children coming to school with social interaction skills than do parents, as teachers have first-hand knowledge of how much time and how many experiences are necessary to assist many kindergarten children to engage in interactions with their peers. This position is supported by previous research which has shown that kindergarten offers opportunities to form friendships with peers and for socialisation, and that parents do value their child developing skills and gaining practice and confidence in interacting with others while at kindergarten (Page et al., 2001).

It is important that effective two-way communication between parents and teachers is fostered, especially when strengthening the personal/social skills of young learners commencing school. Teachers need to make such communication a priority within their classroom, to enhance the opportunities for a unified approach towards the development of young children’s personal/social skills. As Roopnarine and Johnson (2005) observe, ‘teachers must establish ongoing communication with families so that expectations of the child at home and at school are known and coordinated’ (p. 111).

**Personal/social skills which teachers and parents believe are of low-level importance for children commencing kindergarten**

It should be noted that a number of teachers and parents identified several social skills as being not very important for children to possess when starting kindergarten. This may be because they believe that children would develop these skills through their involvement in the kindergarten program. The argument against preparing children socially for kindergarten was highlighted by one parent:

> I do not think you can say any child is ‘ready’ or ‘not ready’ for kindergarten, as every child is brought up in different environments, develops at their own rate and is their own individual personality. Every child needs to learn these skills, but many develop and improve just by being in the kindergarten environment.

It is evident that this parent strongly supports the value of the kindergarten experience for the child, especially in respect to developing strong socialisation skills.

It is important to note that in this study over 30 per cent of teachers identified three personal/social skills related to Attitude to Learning (keeping going to finish something started, persevering in difficult tasks and trying new things they are not sure about), as being not very important for children to be able to do when starting kindergarten. Detracting further from the notion of equipping children personally/socially for school, teachers commented: ‘Some of these are easier to learn in a group of children, rather than at home’ and ‘Most of these things are an important part of the kindergarten year’. Such responses suggest that the importance of children having some of the specified personal/social skills when starting kindergarten should be questioned, because there is greater potential for those skills to be developed throughout the kindergarten year in the company of other children. Research by Page et al. (2001) supports this suggestion, with parents reporting that the most important gains their children made throughout kindergarten were in the area of social development. This indicates that perhaps children should not be expected to possess all of the 22 skills currently specified for the beginning kindergarten child in Tasmanian state school settings, since the kindergarten environment will provide them with opportunities to develop many of these skills, especially in the areas of ‘attitude to learning’ and some aspects of ‘social communication’.
Conclusion

The study has provided important perspectives regarding the notion, advocated by the Department of Education (2002b), that young children should possess a repertoire of personal/social skills when commencing kindergarten. While parents placed higher importance upon children possessing most of the personal/social skills when starting kindergarten, it was also shown that a number of these personal/social skills are developed through involvement in the kindergarten environment. These findings illustrate the importance parents place on taking an active role in developing and enhancing their child’s social understandings and abilities to interact effectively in their social world. These foundations could be seen as vital as teachers and other significant adults assist children to become capable social individuals within the school environment.

Open communication between the home and the school in the years prior to children starting kindergarten, as well as throughout the kindergarten year, would provide greater opportunities for teachers and parents to create clearer understandings of the expectations, practices and responsibilities associated with developing children’s social competence. An understanding of these factors should facilitate awareness among teachers, parents and other stakeholders, so that they are better able to support and cater for preparing children socially for the kindergarten environment and their subsequent social development.

In conclusion, an aspect of concern highlighted in the study is that some skills stated as important in Department of Education documents for a child commencing kindergarten are not age-appropriate. Parents could interpret the information in the Early Social Skills brochure as expectations rather than recommendations, and thus they could unintentionally be holding expectations for their child that are higher than appropriate, especially in respect of younger members of the kindergarten cohort who have only just turned four years old at the start of school. These increased expectations could have serious ramifications for the young child, and it is seen as important for the Department of Education to ensure any recommendations made in documents are accurately researched and are educationally and developmentally sound (King, 2003).

References


REPEATED-VIEWING AND CO-VIEWING OF AN ANIMATED VIDEO: An examination of factors that impact on young children’s comprehension of video content

Helen Skouteris
Leanne Kelly
La Trobe University

The experiment reported here was concerned with the effect of repeat-viewing and adult co-viewing on the comprehension of an animated feature length movie. Four- to six-year-old children watched a movie on video either once or five times, and either with their mother present or on their own. The findings revealed that, after controlling for language skills and interest in the type of video watched, children who watched five times had higher comprehension scores than children who watched only once. Furthermore, children who watched the video repeatedly were also better at character identification and at identifying the good and bad qualities of one of the main characters in the movie. The presence of a mother, who was explicitly asked to co-view the movie with her child, did not facilitate comprehension. The findings are discussed in terms of the educational benefits of repeat viewing. Theoretical implications are also noted.
children’s plot comprehension was assessed by asking the question: ‘How do you play Alphabet Treasure Hunt?’, followed by one of three prompt questions: ‘Tell me more about that’, ‘What else happened?’, or ‘What was the first thing that happened?’ (p. 54). Sell et al.’s findings revealed that children did better on the plot comprehension questions after repeated viewing. However, asking comprehension questions after each viewing may have alerted children to the aims of the experiment; they may have been cued to the fact that they needed to focus on the script of the game. Furthermore, the answering of questions involved retelling part of the story and that, in itself, may have facilitated comprehension. Children not only saw the program three times but also had the opportunity to rehearse program content on two occasions prior to the final viewing.

Crawley et al. (1999) replicated Sell et al.’s study, taking into account these possible confounds. They showed three- and five-year-old children an episode of Blue’s Clues either once only or once a day for five consecutive days. A comprehension test was administered at the end of either the single viewing or the five repeat views, depending on the group the child was in. Crawley et al.’s findings revealed that children exposed to the same episode of Blue’s Clues every day for five days performed better at solving both a familiar and a novel problem (the former was shown in the episode, whereas the latter was not shown) and on the comprehension test than did children who watched the episode only once.

To our knowledge only two studies have examined the effects of repeatedly viewing a movie, as opposed to a curriculum-based television program, on comprehension of the content. Mares (1997, as cited in Crawley et al., 1999) showed six- to nine-year-old children an edited version of a children’s feature film and found that children who watched the film repeatedly were better at character identification and making inferences about the movie than were children who had seen it once only. In another study reported by Mares (1998), four- and five-year-old children better understood characters’ motives, emotions and actions if they saw a simple televised audiovisual story four times as opposed to just once. In this simple story, there was an ugly but kind old woman and a pretty but mean old woman. Repeated viewing facilitated an understanding of the ugly woman being kind (or the pretty woman being mean), hence reducing bias based on ‘physical appearance’.

Given the dearth of research, the first aim of our study was to examine how four-to-six-year-olds’ comprehension of an animated movie was affected by repeated viewing. We were keen to determine whether the positive effects of repeatedly viewing a movie on comprehension of the video content, as reported by Mares, are robust. An animated movie was chosen because animation is popular among children of this age (Skouteris et al., 2002). Children watched the whole movie as they usually do at home, rather than an edited version or a simple story. We assessed their overall comprehension of the storyline and characters and, given the positive findings shown by Mares regarding characters’ motives and actions, we also examined the extent to which overall character identification and an understanding of the ‘good versus bad’ characters was facilitated by repeat viewing.

With repeated viewing, comprehension of the characters and events depicted may increase because of sustained attention to the program. Indeed, Anderson and his colleagues (see Anderson & Lorch, 1983; Lorch, Anderson & Levin, 1979) argued that young children’s attention to a television program is driven by their comprehension of the material. If the material is comprehensible, the child is more likely to attend; if the material is incomprehensible or becomes too familiar, visual attention will decrease (Rice, Huston & Wright, 1986). In contrast to this active theory of processing television content, Singer (1980) argued that if television is rapidly paced it interferes with comprehension. That is, children are seen as passive viewers because their attention is captured primarily by the formal features of television, with little attention paid to the processing of the actual content.

In their study involving repeated viewing of a Blues Clues episode, Crawley et al. (1999) tested both the passive theory of Singer (1980) and the active theory proposed by Anderson and colleagues. Given that the formal features that capture a young child’s attention, such as scene changes and movement, elicit orienting reactions, and these reactions habituate to repetition, Crawley et al. argued that one would expect a decline in visual attention over repeat views for all pre-school children, regardless of specific age, if Singer’s theory is to be supported. In contrast, based on Anderson and Lorch (1983) and Huston and Wright’s (1983) theories, Crawley et al. predicted that comprehension of three-year-olds would benefit from repetition and that their visual attention would increase over repeat views, whereas, for five-year-old children, repetition...
may lead to familiarity with the program content that may then lead to a decrease in looking at the screen. Their findings were more consistent with the latter theories than with Singer’s. Whereas the three-year-old children’s visual attention to the screen remained high and constant over the five repeat views, looking at the screen by five-year-olds decreased from the first to the fifth viewing, and this decrease was larger for five-year-old boys than for five-year-old girls.

Interestingly, the mothers of three- to six-year-olds in Skouteris et al.’s (2002) study reported that their children paid closer attention to the whole video, and took on characters in their role-play if they had watched an animated movie-length video repeatedly and were very familiar with its contents. Clearly, changes in visual attention with repetition warrant further exploration and this was a further aim in this study. It should be noted that, while a positive relationship between visual attention and comprehension of television content has been reported (Anderson, Lorch, Smith, Bradford & Levin, 1981; Krull & Husson, 1979; Lorch et al., 1979), attention is not a sufficient condition for comprehension nor is comprehension a sufficient condition for attention (Huston & Wright, 1983). Indeed, children can and do comprehend material presented on television even when they are not looking at the screen (Lorch et al., 1979).

The final aim in our study was to explore whether co-viewing an animated movie with a parent leads to better comprehension of the video content. This aim was inspired by an earlier finding that a large proportion (71%) of mothers reported being present frequently when their children watch television and that this level of co-viewing frequency was greater for animated movie-length videos (Skouteris et al., 2002). Collins, Solbol and Westby (1981) showed that seven- to eight-year-old children’s comprehension of a television program increased when a co-viewing adult was present to talk to them about the program content. Adults may provide the scaffolding required to assist the child’s understanding.

To our knowledge, the effects of co-viewing a movie with an adult on pre-school children’s overall comprehension of the program content have rarely been examined. Interestingly, Rice, Huston, Truglio and Wright (1990) explored the impact of adult co-viewing on vocabulary development with pre-school children. Their findings revealed that viewing television alone at age three to 3.5 years predicted positive vocabulary development at age five years, whereas viewing television without an adult at the age of three to 3.5 years was not related to vocabulary development at this latter age. It appears that co-viewing has no effect on vocabulary development. Whether overall comprehension of program content increases when young children co-view with an adult was investigated here. We reasoned that, for co-viewing to have an impact on comprehension, a parent and child should interact in both a verbal (e.g. talking about the program, asking questions and answering questions) and non-verbal way (e.g. pointing to the screen to attract the attention of the other person, laughing together at a funny scene) and respond to each other’s questions or comments about the movie. As such, we expected that, if co-viewing is occurring, interactions based on the program content should be responded to more than not responded to. This assumption was also explored.

In summary, we were concerned with addressing four research questions:

1. Does repeat viewing result in better comprehension of the video content, and specifically the ‘good versus bad’ theme in an animated movie for children?

2. Do children who co-view an animated movie with their parent have greater comprehension of the video content?

3. Is percentage of time looking at the screen related to comprehension of video content?

4. How does visual attention change with repetition?

In relation to the first two questions, we were interested in determining the effects on comprehension of repeated exposure to the video and parental co-viewing, over and above child/viewer characteristics that might influence comprehension of video content. The first of these child characteristics was verbal ability. Five-year-old children with high verbal or language skills have been shown to comprehend more of a television program than have children with lower verbal skills (Jacobvitz, Wood & Albin, 1991). Jacobvitz et al. (1991) argued that higher verbal skills in children allow more capacity to process the meaning of the story being depicted because less attention needs to be paid to lower-order processing such as understanding the meaning of words.

The second child/viewer characteristic was interest in the type of program watched. While our earlier research findings showed clearly that children at the age of four–six years watch feature-length animated videos regularly (Skouteris et al., 2002), we proposed that the amount of interest in animated movies may
impact on comprehension of the program content, just as interest in what children read, or have read to them, facilitates literacy skills and comprehension. As such, we hypothesised that, when controlling for these child factors, children who watch an animated movie five times would have better comprehension of the video content on the whole, would better identify the characters in the program, and would have a better understanding of ‘good versus bad’ characters than would children who watch the video only once. No predictions were made about the effects of parental co-viewing on comprehension of the video content, given the lack of previous research.

In relation to the third research question, we hypothesised, based on the findings of Crawley et al. (1999) with the older children, that four- to six-year-old children’s attention to the screen would decrease across repeated views, but that overall looking at the screen would remain high. No prediction was made with respect to the fourth question because of the inconsistency in previous findings.

Method
Participants
A total of 77 preschool children (41 girls and 36 boys) participated in this study ($M$=62.6 months, $SD$=10.1 months, age range=46–82 months). The participants were all born in Australia, had English as their first language and came predominantly from middle-class families living in the northern and south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Children were allocated randomly to one of four experimental conditions. Half of the children watched the animated movie once; the other half watched five times. In each of these two conditions children were further divided into view-alone or co-view conditions. That is, overall, half the children watched the video alone and the other half watched it with their mother, who was instructed to co-view. The number of children in each condition and their gender and age details are presented in Table 1.

Materials
An animated movie video (101 Dalmatians 2) of 70-minutes duration was used in each experimental condition. This movie had not been released for public viewing at the time of testing. The children watched the video in a room set up to resemble a home. Two couches faced a television monitor and video player. A small table placed to the side of one couch held pencils, paper and several story books in order to resemble a home environment where children usually watch television/videos with toys or activity materials nearby. A desk-height table and two chairs, needed for the administration of the vocabulary task and comprehension questions, was positioned behind the couch set-up.

A set of comprehension questions was designed for the video to assess character identification and comprehension of what was happening throughout the program. Parents completed a questionnaire to assess general demographic information. Child interest in watching feature-length animated films was assessed by asking the mothers to respond to the following question, using a four point Likert-scale, from 1 (no interest at all) to 4 (high interest): ‘What level of interest does your child have in feature-length animated videos; e.g. Shrek, Toy Story, Barbie in the Nutcracker?’ As a screening test of verbal ability, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT, Dunn & Dunn, 1981) was used to assess children’s receptive vocabulary. The entire test session, that is the video watching and completion of comprehension questions, was recorded using a ceiling-mounted camera, in the left-hand corner of the room, connected to a video-recorder and colour television located in the control room of the laboratory. This recording allowed us to measure visual attention in terms of the percentage of time the child was oriented towards, or looking at, the television screen.

Procedure
Children and their parents were invited to the Child Development Unit in the School of Psychological

| Table 1. Number of children, their mean age and gender, in each experimental condition |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| View Alone                             | Co-View                                 |
| Single view                            |                                         |
| $n$=19 (9 girls and 10 boys)           | $n$=19 (10 girls and 9 boys)            |
| $M$ age=62.42 months                   | $M$ age=60.37 months                   |
| ($SD$=10.65)                           | ($SD$=10.22)                           |
| Repeat view                            |                                         |
| $n$= 20 (11 girls and 9 boys)          | $n$=17 (9 girls and 8 boys)            |
| $M$ age=61.80 months                   | $M$ age=64.94 months                   |
| ($SD$=10.48)                           | ($SD$=9.13)                            |
Science at La Trobe University for two test sessions, one week apart. Parents remained with their child for the entire duration of testing.

The first test session began with the first or only viewing of the video. Parents of participants in the view-alone condition were asked not to discuss the contents of the video with their child. If their children spoke to them about the movie, they were asked to say they were too busy to talk to them at that time. Parents of participants in the co-view condition were instructed to interact with their children about the movie, to discuss the characters, the storyline and the themes, and to respond fully to any comments or questions from their children.

Parents who did not co-view in the testing room completed the questionnaire placed on the table behind the couch. Parents who co-viewed completed the questionnaire at home and brought it back when they returned for the second session.

For children in the single-view condition, this viewing was followed by the comprehension questions. Children were asked 33 questions about the movie. Of these, 26 questions focused on events depicted in the movie (e.g. ‘How many episodes of “Thunderbolt” had Patch seen?’ and ‘What did Lightening tell Thunderbolt about the next show?’) and seven focused directly on character identification and on an understanding of the good versus bad characters. All questions were open-ended and, in most cases, the child received one point for giving some information and two points for giving all the information. The 26 event-related questions added up to a maximum score of 48. The remaining seven were divided into two categories: (1) one question focused on character identification (the children were presented with pictures of all the main characters and asked to provide the names of these characters) with a maximum score of 16; (2) three focused on identifying who was a good character (maximum score of 6) and three questions on who was a bad character and what they did that was good or bad, with a maximum score of 10. As part of these ‘good’ and ‘bad’ character questions, children were required to identify the different good and bad qualities of Thunderbolt, one of the main characters. The Thunderbolt score was calculated by adding a point for each piece of crucial information about Thunderbolt’s character; this included identifying Thunderbolt as both good and bad and providing an event from the video that demonstrated his good (maximum 2 points) and bad qualities (maximum of 2 points), and by identifying that Thunderbolt’s motivation during the rescues was to become famous and that he had lied to Patch and wasn’t a real wonder dog (maximum 3 points). Hence, the Thunderbolt score had a maximum of seven points and, overall, a maximum score of 80 could be obtained on the comprehension test. Two coders independently scored the answers to the comprehension questions for all participants. Inter-rater reliability between the two coders on these scores was 100 per cent.

Parents of children in the repeat-view condition were provided with a ‘take home pack’ which included the video of the repeat program to be watched and instructions on how the child should view the program three more times at home (abiding by the view-alone and co-view condition the child was in). All children returned to the Child Development Unit exactly one week later, at which time the experimenter administered the PPVT to each child. Children in the repeat-view condition were then asked to watch the repeat view program for the fifth time. Once again, parents were reminded of their viewing condition (either alone or co-view). This final viewing was followed by the comprehension questions for that group of children.

Results
An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Preliminary analyses revealed that males and females did not differ significantly on their overall comprehension scores and their percentage of time looking at the screen (comprehension, \( t(73)=.33, p=.74 \); looking at screen, \( t(73)=1.75, p=.08 \)). In all subsequent analyses the data of boys and girls was collapsed.

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the comprehension test (scored as a percentage of correct responses) and Table 3 presents the means scores and standard deviations of the percentage of time looking at the screen. The mean PPVT standard score and standard deviation for the sample was 108.83 (12.34) and the participants’ mean rating of interest in feature length animated videos was 2.61 (.59).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Mean comprehension scores</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>comprehension overall</td>
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<tr>
<td>comprehension single view</td>
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<tr>
<td>comprehension repeat view</td>
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<tr>
<td>comprehension view alone</td>
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<tr>
<td>comprehension co-view</td>
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\(^a\)Comprehension score range 0–80
that were not responded to. Interactions included both interactions initiated by either the mother or the child, respectively, and the number of mother- or child-initiated interactions responded to (fifth viewing for children in the repeat-view condition, single-view condition (movie on the only (single) viewing for children in the repeat-view condition. There was no significant difference in the number of interactions, initiated by either the mother or the child, that were responded to and the total number of interactions not responded to were 15.87 (9.72) and 9.84 (7.61) respectively, for all co-view participants. The number of interactions, initiated by either the mother or the child, that were responded to was significantly greater than the number not responded to, t(36)=3.78, p=.001.

Given that we were interested in determining the effects on comprehension of repeated exposure to the video and parental co-viewing, over and above child/viewer characteristics that might influence comprehension, the association between these control variables and comprehension was explored first (see Table 2 for relevant scores on comprehension; see Table 4 for PPVT and interest in feature-length animated videos). There was a significant correlation between children’s comprehension scores and their PPVT scores (r=.27; p<.01), and between comprehension and interest in feature-length animated videos (r=.25; p<.01). The results of two one-way ANCOVAs, one to explore the effects of co-viewing on comprehension and the other to explore the effects of repeat viewing on comprehension, controlling for PPVT scores and interest in feature-length animated videos, revealed that there was no significant main effect for the alone/co-view condition F(1,62)=.04, p=.84. However, there was a significant main effect for the single/repeat condition F(1,70)=20.87, p<.0005, with comprehension scores being significantly higher for participants in the repeat viewing condition. There was also no correlation between comprehension and the number of interactions responded to by the child/mother, r=-.03, p=.87, and between comprehension and interactions not responded to, r=-.21, p=.25.

**Good versus bad characters**

The means and standard deviations for overall character identification, good guys, bad guys and Thunderbolt score for the single and repeat view conditions are presented in Table 4. The scores for each category were higher for the repeat view condition.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3. Mean percentage of time looking at the screen across repeat views</th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at screen overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at screen single view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at screen first of repeat view</td>
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<tr>
<td>Looking at screen fifth of repeat view</td>
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</table>

**Percentage of time looking at the screen across repeat views**

Interobserver reliability for the scoring of percentage of time looking at the screen was assessed by having two coders code 20 of the videotapes independently (10 in the single view and 10 in the repeat-view condition), with r=.91, p<.0005. A one-way ANOVA revealed that the percentage of time looking at the screen differed significantly from the first to the fifth view. While children watched the screen for a significantly shorter proportion of time on the fifth viewing, F(1,36)=9.34, p=.004, the findings revealed that children spent almost the whole time looking at the screen for both the first and fifth views.

To assess whether there was a relationship between percentage of time looking at the screen (collapsed across all conditions) and comprehension of program content (collapsed across all conditions), a bivariate correlation was run. There was no association between these two variables, r=.05, p=.65. Indeed, there were no significant correlations even when the relationship between comprehension and percentage of time looking at the screen was compared for each experimental group separately.

**Repeat viewing, co-viewing and comprehension**

In order to explore the effects of co-viewing on comprehension, it was necessary to first ascertain that children and parents did in fact co-view. We examined in detail the level of interaction between mother and child by coding the video footage of the pair watching the movie on the only (single) viewing for children in the single-view condition (n=19) and for both the first and fifth viewing for children in the repeat-view condition (n=17). These interactions were coded as the number of mother- or child-initiated interactions responded to by the child or mother, respectively, and the number of interactions initiated by either the mother or the child that were not responded to. Interactions included both verbal and non-verbal behaviours, such as commenting on the characters (child: ‘I don’t like Cruella’; mother: ‘No, she isn’t very nice’) and child smiling at parent and parent smiling back during an amusing episode. The video footage of 10 children in each experimental condition was assessed for inter-rater reliability, with r=.93, p<.0005. The means and standard deviations (in brackets) for the total number of interactions responded to and the total number of interactions not responded to were 15.87 (9.72) and 9.84 (7.61) respectively, for all co-view participants. The number of interactions, initiated by either the mother or the child, that were responded to was significantly greater than the number not responded to, t(36)=3.78, p=.001.
Table 4. Mean percentage correct and standard deviations for the Character Identification score, Good Guys score, Bad Guys score and Thunderbolt score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% correct</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aCharacter ID</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repeat</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bGood Guys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repeat</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>34.8</td>
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Overall character identification was significantly better with repeat viewing than with single viewing, \( t(73)=4.83, p<.0005 \), as was identifying the good and bad qualities of Thunderbolt, \( t(73)=3.01, p=.004 \). The difference between single and repeat view for both the good guys score and the bad guys score did not reach significance, \( t(73)=.19, p=.84 \) and \( t(73)=1.82, p=.07 \) respectively, albeit the latter result suggests a trend toward repeat viewing facilitating an understanding of bad guys.

Discussion

We addressed four research questions in this study. The first explored the effects on comprehension of video content of repeatedly viewing an animated movie. The test group was children aged four–six years. Our hypothesis that, when controlling for both interest in the video and receptive vocabulary, children who watched an animated movie five times would have better comprehension of the video content was on the whole supported. The children in the repeat-view condition were also better at character identification and were better able to talk about characters; in particular, the children were better able to identify why one of the main characters, Thunderbolt, was both a good and bad guy. Why is increased comprehension of video material important? Mares points out the behavioural outcomes of viewing, such as imitation of antisocial and prosocial content. She argues that children who at first do not understand the connections between violent actions and consequences may be more inclined to imitate these violent acts than are children who have watched a video repeatedly and understand that violent or bad behaviour leads to punishment. Similarly, prosocial acts that initially are not obvious to young children may become so with repeated viewing, leading perhaps to more positive behaviours. It is possible that, if repeated viewing facilitates children’s understanding of prosocial and antisocial behaviours and the consequences associated with each, then repetition of video material depicting such information might be a useful tool in teaching these behaviours. Mares also points out that repeat viewing may have implications for achievements in areas such as vocabulary development or acquisition of story grammars. Future research should be directed toward systematically exploring whether repeated viewing of appropriate television/video content can foster social and academic development in young children.

The second research question involved exploring whether co-viewing a video with a parent leads to better comprehension of the video content. Given that researchers have argued that co-viewing is fairly uncommon with young children (Dorr, Kovaric & Doubleday, 1989), it was important to first establish whether or not our attempt to elicit adult co-viewing was successful. In the co-viewing group, we found that the number of interactions initiated by either the mother or the child that were responded to—during the video viewing—was significantly greater than the number not responded to. As such, it appears that parents and children in this study were co-viewing when asked to do so. Despite this interaction, co-viewing did not improve children’s comprehension of the video content. In accordance with the findings of Rice et al. (1990), who explored vocabulary development, it appears that adult co-viewing does not facilitate understanding of video content when the video watched is specifically geared toward a young
child audience. Given that the children might have already been familiar with the original *101 Dalmatians*, it is possible that parental interaction with the video was not needed to make certain characters and events salient to the children.

The findings here do not suggest that co-viewing is futile. Indeed, there are other reasons why adults should co-view with young children; researchers have proposed that co-viewing is important because parents can monitor what their children are watching and so can potentially reduce the negative effects of violent content by disapproving of violence (Jordan, 2001; Hogan, 2001). So, while there appears to be no evidence that co-viewing helps to facilitate children's understanding of the material presented, as was argued by Jordan (2001) and Hogan (2001), further research is needed to explore the situations in which adult co-viewing is important in terms of processing program content when young children are the viewers.

Exploring the third research question—whether percentage of time looking at the screen and comprehension of video content are related—revealed that there was no significant association between these two variables. This finding does not accord with the positive relationship between visual attention and comprehension of television content reported in previous research (Anderson, et al., 1981; Krull & Husson, 1979; Lorch et al., 1979). Given that visual attention to the screen was so high in this study, it is possible that children were looking but not necessarily comprehending, which suggests that visual attention is not a sufficient condition for comprehension (Huston & Wright, 1983).

The final research question was ‘How does visual attention or looking at the screen change with repetition?’ As mentioned previously, attention to the screen was very high for both the first and the fifth viewings, albeit the percentage of time spent looking at the screen for the fifth viewing was significantly lower than for the first viewing. This finding supported our hypothesis and, in accordance with the theories of Lorch et al. (1979) and Rice et al. (1986), suggests that young children's attention to the screen while watching a video is driven by their comprehension of the content and that, as the content becomes more familiar and predictable, visual attention is likely to decrease. Our findings do not support Singer's (1980) theory that children are passive viewers and that the formal features of the program interfere with comprehension. Children's comprehension clearly improved over repeat views despite their visual attention declining.

Our findings also revealed that children's language abilities and their interest in feature-length animated videos were correlated positively with comprehension of content. These two factors are outlined in Fisch's (2000) capacity model of children's comprehension of both the narrative and educational components of an educational television program. Fisch identifies both viewer and program characteristics that are purportedly important for successful comprehension. The model is silent, though, in respect of the impact of repeat viewing and how this might contribute to increased comprehension. In fact, developmental theories of learning have little to say about the effects of repetition (Crawley et al., 1999).

Clearly, the mechanisms involved in understanding material that is presented to children in educational programs and in animated feature-length movies warrant further investigation. In addition, the current findings should be extended by exploring whether children transfer the information they process from a feature-length animated movie to a new situation. Can children transfer knowledge gained in one context to a new situation or context, such as an understanding of the negative consequences of being deceitful (as portrayed by Thunderbolt in the movie)? While a review of the literature by Fisch (2004) reveals that educational television is capable of producing transfer, none of this literature addresses animated feature-length movies that are so frequently watched by young children. Anecdotal evidence from parents suggests that preschool children are able to use information obtained from these videos in their imaginative and creative play (Skouteris et al., 2002). Systematic exploration of significant learning transfer from such animated movies is warranted to confirm these anecdotal accounts.

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References


LIFE CHANCES: Including the children’s view

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Brotherhood of St Laurence

What happens to children who are disadvantaged as infants? What do children themselves think about their childhood experiences? The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study initiated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence to explore the impacts of family income and associated factors on children growing up. The study commenced with 167 children born in inner Melbourne in 1990. All the families have been interviewed at six stages, most recently when the children were aged 11 and 12. Data was collected from the children themselves, their parents and teachers. This article draws on the longitudinal data to discuss some of the changes the families have undergone over the children’s early years, including geographic mobility, family structure and family income. Three-quarters of the children who were born into low-income families remained in low-income families 12 years later. Case studies of children who have grown up in families on low incomes are presented. The children’s own views are outlined and some of the policy implications raised.

What happens to children who are disadvantaged as infants and what do children themselves think about their childhood experiences? This article introduces the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s longitudinal Life Chances Study to explore these questions. The study commenced with a birth cohort in 1990 and is now considering the issues for the children as adolescents. Given the interest in the data being released from the new large-scale Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2005), it is timely to consider the recent findings of one of its predecessors. This paper draws on the Life Chances Study’s longitudinal data to examine the changes families experience during their children’s early years; it presents two case studies of children who have grown up in families on low incomes, to illustrate the complexity of disadvantage; and it presents some of the children’s own accounts of selected aspects of their lives.

Background to the Life Chances Study
The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a large welfare agency with a long history of research into causes and effects of, and solutions to, poverty and disadvantage. The Life Chances Study was developed in the context of the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s research and policy work on child poverty in Australia in the late 1980s (Carter, 1991; Choo, 1900; Harris, 1989) (and the Australian Prime Minister’s promise, ‘No child shall live in poverty by 1990’) and the need for contemporary longitudinal studies to examine the impacts of disadvantage on children in a changing social environment.

The Life Chances Study was inspired by the British documentary films, the ‘Seven Up’ series, which highlighted the diverse situations in which a small number of children of the same age were growing up. It was developed with knowledge (but without the resources) of the large-scale British, US and New Zealand studies (Duncan, 1984; Shepherd, 1987; Silva & Stanton, 1996). The study was informed by discussion with researchers from the earlier Australian longitudinal studies of children from birth, including the Brunswick Family Study, the Australian Temperament Project, and the Mater–University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy (see for example Bor et al., 1993; Prior et al., 1989; Smith & Carmichael, 1992). The Life Chances Study can be distinguished from these studies not only in time (it involved children born up to a decade later than the earlier studies), but also in the diversity of socioeconomic factors explored. It has a particular combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the latter providing a focus on the way the families and children concerned experience and explain their situation. The study’s moderate size (142 children in Stage 6), gives it the advantage of allowing systematic analysis of qualitative data and pathways not always feasible in large-scale studies.
The study’s aims
The broad aims of the Life Chances Study (Taylor & Fraser 2003, p. 1) are:

• to examine over an extended period the life opportunities and life outcomes of a small group of Australian children, including the influences of social, economic and environmental factors on children’s lives
• to compare the lives of children in families on low incomes with those in more affluent circumstances
• to contribute to the development of government and community interventions to improve the lives of Australian children, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances.

There is considerable and continuing research evidence concerning the association of low family income and disadvantage for children (Bradshaw, 2003; Bynner, 1999; Richardson, 2005). There is, however, more limited knowledge about the processes which link low income and outcomes for children. The Life Chances Study is concerned with questions such as why and how family income influences children’s health and wellbeing and their social and educational development. It gives priority to the perspectives of the participants on their own situations.

Conceptual background
The Life Chances Study has been informed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological development approach which provides a framework that draws attention to the various settings influencing a child’s development and highlights the complexity and interactive nature of these influences. The child is seen as an active participant in these interactions.

Long-term effects of childhood experience
Both Australian and overseas longitudinal studies have shown a variety of long-term effects of children’s early experiences. For example, low family income in childhood has been associated with poorer long-term educational performance in British and US longitudinal studies (Bynner, 1999; Duncan et al., 1998; Ermisch et al., 2001), as well as in Australian studies (for example, Teese, 2005). However, many studies show that adverse effects are not uniform, with some disadvantaged children doing well on the measures used (for example, Bynner, 1999). Bynner (2001, p. 295) concludes, from reviewing longitudinal studies, that the picture is one of ‘predictability qualified by complexity’. One of the challenges for researchers is to distinguish the impacts of early poverty from those of persistent poverty during childhood (Rutter, 1994). Another challenge is to distinguish the impacts of the often overlapping factors of low income, limited parental education, occupational status or unemployment.

The resilience of children living in disadvantaged circumstances is widely discussed in the literature (recent examples include Mackay, 2003; Peters et al., 2005). Low income, large family size, unskilled parents, frequent changes of residence, divorced or single parents, and negative life events have been identified as risk factors for children. Studies have found that a number of factors, such as the child having a positive temperament and close relationships, can act as significant protective factors against these risks (Smith & Prior, 1995). The coping skills of resilient children are often evident early on and can be strengthened over time, while those children having difficulties coping may progressively fall behind (Najman et al., 1998). Of particular concern for policy-makers and practitioners are children who are exposed to multiple risk factors.

While research in brain development in early childhood has led to an emphasis on the importance of the early years (Cashmore, 2001; Drielsma, 2000; Ochiltree, 1999), analysis of longitudinal data shows both the ongoing effects of early development and the impacts of subsequent events on development (Feinstein, 2001; 2003).

Children’s perspectives in research
There has been recent interest in social research actively involving children, acknowledging their perspectives on their lives and recognising how absent their voices have been from public policy debates. This reflects the wider acknowledgement of children in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. American research has included Galinsky’s (1999) study of children’s views of their parents’ working, and there has been Australian research on a similar topic (Lewis et al., 2001) as well as on educational issues (Potter & Briggs, 2003). The British ‘Children 5–16 Research’ study focuses on children as social actors (Prout, 2002). Ridge’s (2002) important study of childhood poverty in England explores poverty and social exclusion from the viewpoint of children and young people living in low-income families. Ridge challenges the assumptions that children are incompetent witnesses and that adults can always be used as proxies for children. There has also been recent emphasis in the UK on bringing children’s views into policy-making (Kay et al., 2004; Stafford et al., 2003).
**Method**

The Life Chances Study was designed as a population study in an inner urban area. The area was selected because of its heterogeneous population, including both high- and low-income earners, high and low educational levels, a range of housing tenures and of ethnic groups, including recent refugees. The study sought to explore the life chances of a group of children who were born at the same time in the same place but into very diverse families. While the study in no way claims to be representative of all Australian children, aspects of the experiences of these families are likely to be shared by many others. The details of the method are presented in the research reports of each stage (see below).

The Life Chances Study commenced with 167 children born in inner Melbourne in 1990. The Maternal and Child Health Service identified mothers of all children born in two municipalities over a six-month period and made the initial recruitment contact. Of the potential families, 66 per cent agreed to participate in the study. The families of the 167 children who participated in the first stage of the study were representative of the population of the two municipalities in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity, based on the known characteristics of those who did not participate. They included both high- and low-income families (defined below) and a range of ethnic groups, the largest numbers of overseas-born parents being from Vietnam and Turkey.

All the families have been interviewed on six occasions:

- **Stage 1**—children aged six months (Gilley, 1993a; Taylor & MacDonald, 1992)
- **Stage 2**—children aged 18 months (Gilley, 1993b)
- **Stage 3**—children aged three years (Gilley & Taylor, 1995; Taylor & MacDonald, 1994)
- **Stage 4**—children aged five years (Taylor, 1997)
- **Stage 5**—children aged six years (Taylor & MacDonald, 1998)
- **Stage 6**—children aged 11 and 12 (Taylor & Fraser, 2003).

The study has maintained a high level of contact with the families. Of the original 167 children, 142 were included in the study at Stage 6 in 2002 (85 per cent of the original sample). Some families withdrew from the study either permanently or temporarily and some were unable to be located after they moved. Overall, low-income families from non-English-speaking backgrounds have been most likely to be lost to the study, a loss found also in other studies. Nonetheless, contact has been maintained with many of these families.

By Stage 6 only one-third of the families were still in the original area. Most were elsewhere in Melbourne, while four per cent were in rural Victoria and 11 per cent were interstate or overseas. The study has continued to include the families who moved away from the original area.

While in the early stages the mothers were the main informants, by Stage 6 data was collected from both parents, teachers and the children themselves. Parents (mostly mothers) completed an extensive primary carer’s questionnaire through face-to-face interviews or by mail or phone. This covered child- and family-related variables including health and development, relationships, school, social supports, employment, housing and family income. There was also a shorter questionnaire for fathers. The children undertook the four-page ‘About Myself’ questionnaire developed for the study, and teachers completed an ‘Academic Competence’ checklist for each child (derived from Gresham & Elliot, 1990). The qualitative data was generally analysed thematically, the quantitative data using SPSS.

In Stage 6 additional more open-ended interviews were undertaken with selected children and parents to obtain richer qualitative data, particularly for children growing up in low-income families. The 54 families selected were the 44 families who were on low incomes over the children’s first six years of life (34 of whom were still on low incomes) and, for contrast, 10 families who were considered advantaged (in terms of high income, health and relationships) at the commencement of the study. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Where possible the same interviewers were used at each stage, including two bilingual interviewers (Cantonese and Vietnamese).

Stage 7 has recently commenced with interviews with a sub-sample of some 40 children now aged 15, and their parents.

**Selected findings**

The findings presented here draw on both the quantitative and qualitative data to show changes over time for the whole sample and for individual families in terms of family structure and income, including the children’s perspective. More detailed results for these and other variables, including educational achievement, health status and use of services, appear in the research reports.
Family structure

An unexpected finding was the number of deaths of parents over the 12 years of the study. Of the 167 children at the start of the study, seven per cent were known to have lost a parent by age 11 and 12 (causes included drug-related deaths and cancer). While the children were not asked specifically about this, some whose parents had died raised it and expressed their sadness in the interviews, for example when discussing important events in their lives or things they would wish for. For example, one boy’s wish was that ‘my dad was around a bit more, like living here with us’.

Family separations were a major factor for some children. At ages 11 and 12, 80 per cent of the children were living in two-parent families and 20 per cent in sole-parent families; however, one-third of the children had lived in a sole-parent family at some stage of their lives. Half the children who were in sole-parent families at six months of age were also in sole-parent families at 11 and 12, although some had been in two-parent families in the interim.

When interviewed, some children discussed their experiences of their parents’ separations. The children seemed less likely to be positive about the separations than were their parents. A number spoke of their sadness at not seeing more of the parent with whom they were not living. This was particularly the case for some whose non-resident parent had remarried. One 11-year-old girl described herself as ‘an emotional wreck’ because of her parents’ separation. Another child wept as she spoke of missing her older sister with whom she no longer lived. One boy spoke with some insight of his reactions:

It got annoying but it wasn’t the end of the world, I knew that much. I still got by, but when Mum and Dad split up and that was the period where they didn’t have that much money, that was the year I started pretty much being a trouble-maker. My school went completely downhill; I hated it, and I didn’t like school much and it wasn’t very much fun here, so it wasn’t the best of times, but, yeah, it was still okay. Dad’s house, the flat was small but it was quite nice in there, I didn’t mind it, but, yeah, I was still doing really bad at school.

Family income

Low income is defined in the study as below 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line (a category defined as ‘poor’ by Professor Henderson [Carter, 1991]), high income as above the cut-off for eligibility for Family Tax Benefit A, and medium income as between these two categories. Incomes are adjusted for family size and updated over time. For example, for a couple with two children in 2002 the low income level was below $34,369 per annum, for a sole parent with one child below $20,027 (see Taylor & Fraser, 2003).

The percentage of families on low incomes decreased slightly, from 30 per cent at the start of the study to 27 per cent after 12 years. Throughout the study, families on low incomes have included disproportionately: parents with less than tertiary education, those born overseas with limited English, sole parents, parents who were unemployed, and families with large numbers of children. These characteristics, especially in combination, make it difficult for low-income families to increase their income significantly.

The Life Chances Study found that some children were raised on low incomes for relatively short periods, but others endured prolonged financial hardship. A key finding was that three-quarters of the children in families on low incomes at six months of age were still living in low-income families when they were 11- and 12-year-olds. The families whose income rose above the low-income line generally remained on incomes quite close to that line.

Selected differences between the families living on low incomes and other families

When the children were about six months old, mothers on low incomes were significantly (statistical significance at a level of probability of .05 using chi-square) more likely than other mothers to report the following stressful life events: the mother having a major health problem; serious disagreements with their partner; and serious financial problems. They were also more likely to say that they had problems managing their child. In terms of social support they were significantly less likely to receive help with their child from grandparents and friends than were the mothers in more affluent families. Refugee and migrant families often had grandparents overseas and unable to assist (Gilley, 1993a).

Most of these differences persisted over time (Gilley & Taylor, 1995; Taylor & Fraser, 2003; Taylor & Macdonald, 1998). Not only did the low-income families face greater stresses on average than did other families, but also they continued to do so with fewer informal social supports, less help from grandparents and friends, and less use of services.

In terms of formal supports, the study found similar use
of GPs and maternal and child health services. However low-income parents were significantly less likely to use paid child care than were other families at all stages (statistical significance at a level of probability of .05 using chi-square). As three-year-olds, the children in low income families were less likely to use local libraries or attend playgroups. As six-year-olds and 11- and 12-year-olds, they were less likely to participate in out-of-school activities such as sport, music or dance than were many of their more affluent peers. They were also more likely to miss out on activities at school, because of the cost of excursions, camps and swimming lessons. As 11- and 12-year-olds they were less likely to have computer or internet access at home.

Pressures on low income families: Two cases

The two families introduced below remained on low incomes over 12 years but underwent changes in family structure and in employment. One changed from a two-parent family with employment to a sole-parent family with no work, while the other changed from a sole-parent family to a two-parent family with employment. They illustrate the pressures associated with low income. Both the parents’ and the children’s views are presented. Pseudonyms are used.

Lisa

Lisa’s parents were refugees from Vietnam. Neither parent spoke English well. When Lisa was born in 1990, her father was working on a low wage as a clerk in a factory. He had education to Year 10, her mother only three years of primary schooling. The father subsequently tried unsuccessfully to start an import–export business. By the time Lisa was six years old, he had returned to Vietnam, her parents had divorced, her mother had remarried and separated again. By the time Lisa was aged 11, her mother and the two children were reliant on Parenting Payment (Single), which the mother found insufficient to meet daily costs. The mother had had times of depression, including a suicide attempt. As a result of a car accident she suffered back and neck problems and lost her part-time job as a process worker. Through an interpreter, she said she feared for the future:

Recently, after paying all the bills, I am again in desperate need of money. I also try and eat less myself, so that the children may eat more. I am not sure whether I will have enough money in the next few years, because I cannot work. I must rely on handouts. Originally I had planned to work, with the little one attending prep. However, the accident has dissolved all hope of that. Now I wish to go back to school and find a part-time job that is less demanding on the body. Working part time, because I would be able to pick up the kids from school ... I hope the government can set up a department or something special for us injured people to work so that I may become less dependent on government. I am not a lazy person, I have been seeking work for ages; however, at the mention of being a TAC [Traffic Accident Commission] victim I am instantly rejected.

Aged 11, Lisa was in Year 6 at a government school (her third school). Her mother had difficulty with the cost of the camp ($240), the choir and choir uniform. The school allowed her to pay in instalments. Lisa herself said that what she did not like about school was that there is ‘too much money to pay’. She missed out on some school activities and was not involved in any activities away from school. Her mother would have liked her to have piano lessons and some tutoring, but could not afford these. She spoke of her hopes for her children’s future: ‘I wish them to attend university. I don’t think I can afford it; however, I will try my best.’

Lisa remembered times when there was not enough money:

That was bad. Because we couldn’t have enough for dinner, and when our shoes don’t fit we don’t have money to buy them.

If she had one wish:

I would wish we had a bigger house and, yeah, more money than now. And my mum’s health problem will recover.

Lisa hoped to be a designer when she grows up.

Kylie

Kylie was born into a sole-parent family, the youngest of four children living on a high-rise public housing estate in inner Melbourne. Her parents were Australian-born. Her father, who was not living with the family, was unemployed. Neither parent had completed secondary school; both had some problems with reading. The mother and children moved to a country town and were eventually reunited with the father, who found work in a sawmill. By the time Kylie was 11, he had worked full-time at the mill for a number of years, but was earning a very low wage. His take-home pay was $410 a week. He said:

Even though I work hard and bring home a wage, it’s not adequate for what I’d like to be able to provide for them as a parent. My pay’s very inadequate.

He also worried about the dangers of the job and lack
of maintenance of the mill. The mother wanted to work but could not find a paid job in the country town. She emphasised, ‘We need that second job.’

Kylie was in Year 6 at a government primary school in a country town. She only sometimes looked forward to going to school. Her mother felt welcome at the school and helped with the fete and coached basketball. She was satisfied with the school apart from the costs. The camp would be particularly difficult to afford, but her mother felt she had to let Kylie go because she had missed out on camps in the past. Kylie had friends she saw often and with whom she played basketball. However, she could not play for the local squad because it cost too much to travel to the other towns in the competition. Her mother also could not afford the $300 for Kylie to do jazz ballet with her friend.

Kylie remembered times when there was not enough money:

Oh, it was still normal but you couldn’t have everything you used to have. And you missed out on, say, a treat or something and you couldn’t get an ice-cream. It didn’t bother me because you don’t always need ice-cream.

If she had one wish to change her life, what would she wish for? ‘Nothing, really.’ Kylie hoped to be a sports teacher at her own primary school when she grows up.

Kylie and her family showed considerable resilience but remained economically vulnerable and struggling.

The two case studies highlight the interaction of aspects of disadvantage and the difficulty low-income families have in increasing their incomes over time, and the limitations low incomes place on their children’s ability to participate fully in the society around them.

The children’s views

In interviews the children aged 11 and 12 discussed various aspects of their family life, school, friends, their hopes and fears. Their views on money, and on their wider life chances, are outlined below to illustrate aspects on which children’s voices are seldom heard.

The importance of money

The low-income parents in the study spoke of how they tried to protect their children from the stresses and restrictions of life on a low income, often going without themselves to put their children first. This was successful to some degree, as the children were more likely than the parents to see themselves as having the same amount as money ‘as most families’. However, some were very aware of the impacts of low income.

We asked the children from families who had been on low incomes throughout the study whether they thought money was important for families. While most thought money was important, responses ranged from ‘If you don’t have any money you can’t live’ to ‘Money is not your life’.

The children most often explained the importance of money for families in terms of being able to buy food. Food was clearly a central concern for these 11- and 12-year-olds. The next most frequent responses included general comments about the importance of money for paying bills and for housing or shelter. A few children mentioned specific school costs and other costs such as clothing or furniture:

Basically you need lots of money; you need to buy food with money, buy a house with money, like beds and clothes and TV, pay your bills.

A small number of children raised on low incomes said money was not important, asserting happiness or family was more important. One spoke of the problems of too much money:

No … and like sometimes when people get money somebody is jealous and somebody might kill the one that has money.

More than half the children in the long-term low-income families said their families had enough money, while a few qualified this by saying ‘sometimes’ or ‘for some things’. The remainder said they did not have enough, lacking money for such things as school costs, bills, food, clothing and buying a house.

One girl speaking of her early life remembered what her mother had told her:

When I was two years old and my brother was like a baby and my dad used to gamble and he used to borrow our money and we couldn’t get anything to eat.

The same girl, when asked what she would wish for, replied:

To be smarter, I think. And have a better life because we haven’t got like really much … Some people have better chances of getting something than us, because we haven’t got like enough money or anything.

What was it like for the children when there was not enough money? The most common response was in terms of feeling ‘sad’, while a few children described themselves as ‘upset’, ‘jealous’ or ‘angry’. When asked with whom he felt angry, one child responded ‘myself’.
Life chances
The children in interviews were asked about their views of the wider society, including: ‘Do you think everyone in Australia has an equal chance to have a good life?’ The initial responses of the 11- and 12-year-old children who had grown up in families on low incomes were generally positive, but many then qualified their answers. Those who emphasised the equality of life chances referred to such things as Australia being a rich country and a free country; that it is up to people themselves if they want to learn; and one commented, ‘Everyone has a right to be special.’ However, a major theme for those who did not feel there was an equal chance was that some people could not afford what they needed. Kylie’s response illustrates this theme:

Like those people whose parents can’t afford food and clothing and stuff.

Other responses leaned more towards personal failings such as laziness, or as Lisa responded:

Some people they have a chance but they let it go.

Unprompted, a number of children from Vietnamese and Chinese families raised their experience of racism. To the question on equal chances one responded:

Not exactly, because some people might think that Asian people, they’re not really good because they weren’t born here or they have different skin colour—like racists.

Discussion
Strengths and limitations of the research
The strengths of the Life Chances Study include the value of its longitudinal timeframe for exploring the interrelationships of key factors in the children’s lives; the scope for integration of qualitative and quantitative data; and the nature of the sample which enables comparisons between low- and high-income families. While some families have been lost from the study, there has been continuing contact with disadvantaged families, a group many studies find hard to reach. This category includes parents who do not speak English and/or have limited literacy. A further strength of the study is that it draws together the insights and experiences of children, parents and teachers.

As a relatively small-scale study, the Life Chances Study cannot be said to be representative of all Australian children. However, its qualitative data provides a useful adjunct to larger-scale population studies.

Implications for policy and service provision
The findings raise a range of issues for policy-makers and for service providers seeking to assist children growing up in diverse families.

The geographic mobility of many families with young children has implications for the availability of informal support from relatives, friends and neighbours as well as for the continuity of formal support from early childhood services and of continuity of schooling. The reasons for moving included family separations, seeking employment and housing choices. Mobility may have been higher than average in our sample because of its inner urban starting point. However, it raises the challenge for children’s services of how to make locally-based services accessible to mobile families, how to ensure newcomers are aware of what is available and are not excluded because of waiting lists, and how to ensure continuity of specialist services.

Parental separations were a major disruption to the lives of the children in the study as they are in many families in Australia. Some of the children, as 11- and 12-year-olds, spoke with considerable distress of the impact of separations on their past and current lives and some carried a very real sense of loss for many years, in a way not necessarily acknowledged by their parents. Childhood service providers and educators need to be very aware of the impacts that home disruptions are likely to have on children, especially, but not only, in the short term.

In general the children growing up in low-income families were less aware of their relative disadvantage than were their parents, who tried to protect them from missing out, often by going without themselves. However, some of the children were very aware of the family’s lack of money to do the things other families could, including paying bills, let alone owning a car or a house. The findings highlight the compounding of social exclusion for children in low-income families, who, for example, not only miss out on such things as family holidays and out-of-school activities such as sport and music, but are also excluded from having these experiences at school because of the extra costs associated with school camps and excursions. It is crucial that organisations providing such extra activities for children find ways of including children from low-income families. Other aspects of schooling leading to social exclusion for children in low-income families include costs of ‘voluntary’ fees, uniforms and books, and the increasing assumption of computer ownership and internet access.
Many of the parents on low incomes were reliant on social security payments as sole parents, job seekers or people with disabilities. The current proposals for welfare reform, which reduce the income support available to future sole-parent families and those with disabilities (Ziguras, 2005) and also force parents to seek work when their children reach school age, seem counterproductive if the aim is to facilitate parents bringing up children. The low-income parents in our study, such as Lisa’s and Kylie’s mothers, were keen to work, but suitable work was unavailable. While there is considerable policy rhetoric about choice for families, this does not seem to extend to low-income sole-parent families. Our study highlights the multiple barriers that many low-income families face in terms of limited education, health problems and the lack of informal supports. These families need to be facilitated in their efforts to gain employment, not coerced at the expense of their children’s needs.

Conclusions
The diverse experiences of the children and families of the Life Chances Study provide a window into aspects of Australian society that are ‘everyday’ for some families but difficult to imagine for others. They illustrate well the ‘predictability qualified by complexity’ found in other longitudinal studies of children’s lives (Bynner, 2001, p. 295).

The longitudinal nature of the Life Chances Study highlights both continuity and change in the children’s lives; in particular: the high proportion of children who had moved geographically (more than two-thirds by age 11 and 12); the high proportion of children who experienced family separation (one-third had lived in a sole parent family at some stage); and the high proportion of children (three-quarters of those born into low-income families) whose families remained on low incomes.

The findings have implications for social policy at the federal level in terms of provision of adequate incomes for families with children, particularly adequate income support and adequate wages, as well as social investment in housing, health and education. For the benefit of children growing up in persistently low-income families, policies need to ensure adequate family income—both adequate social security payments for sole parents and unemployed parents and adequate minimum wages for workers—in order to reduce the stresses of financial hardship and to meet rising costs. Welfare-to-work policies need to recognise not only parents’ barriers to employment but also children’s needs to have support from parents at home.

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Notes: Life Chances reports are available from the Brotherhood of St Laurence: email publications@bsl.org.au, website www.bsl.org.au.

A documentary film, Life Changes, was made in 1994 with SBS TV exploring the lives of seven of the children as four-year-olds.

References


HORIZONTAL VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: Implications for leadership enactment

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Leadership is a contested term in many contexts and means various things to different people. In early childhood education and care (ECEC) it is understood in multilayered terms. This paper draws on a qualitative research study which employed symbolic interactionism as a methodological tool and drew data from 26 participants from the ECEC field (in particular the birth-to-five sector). The enactment of leadership in ECEC emerges as heavily influenced by factors both internal and external to the field. This paper will discuss horizontal violence as one of the significant internal impediments to leadership enactment. The notion of horizontal violence originated in nursing literature and in this paper highlights contradictions between a lingering discourse of niceness and a culture which condones behaviours that marginalise and exclude others. The outcome of this culture is a powerful expectation of compliance which does little to foster or encourage leadership activity. Suggestions are made which focus on an open discussion of this phenomenon within the ECEC field in order to address behaviours which are currently constraining leadership activity.

The notion of leadership has been defined by numerous authors and there has been considerable work in this area over the past century, yet the picture remains incomplete. Terms related to leadership include individual traits, influence over people, role relationships and situational characteristics. Other related factors include meeting people’s needs, mobilising power, negotiating agreements and political actions. According to Macbeath (2004), the term is ‘full of ambiguity and has a range of interpretations. It is a “humpty-dumpty” word that can mean “just what we want it to be”’ (from Humpty Dumpty, in Alice in Wonderland) (p. 4). Management and leadership are interrelated concepts and a clear separation is not necessarily possible or desirable, particularly in early childhood education and care (ECEC). According to Jorde Bloom (2003), management involves systems to attain a vision, while leadership goes beyond to create ideas and motivate people. Management positions often do incorporate some leadership, and most often leadership involves management duties. Perhaps the essence of the term leadership revolves around the notion of creating positive change in organisations. This paper explores the relationship between the notion of leadership in ECEC and factors identified as internal to the field which inhibit leadership enactment.

Literature review

Three schools of thought have traditionally dominated leadership literature; and these include individual traits, behaviours of leaders, and the context of the leadership. Individual traits have often been characterised as self-confidence, dominating, achievement-orientated and social agreeableness. Trait theories see leaders as concerned with the big picture rather than process, and this approach is often associated with the ‘great person’ notion of leadership (Northcraft & Neale, 1994). According to Hill and Ragland (1995), leadership understandings have not progressed far from ‘assuming that the tallest man would naturally be the best leader’ (p. 9). Current literature suggests that consideration of traits should not be dismissed entirely, since the personality of the leader does make a difference (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003). Leadership behaviours often polarise into either task- or production-orientated leaders or socio-emotional leadership. It seems that effective leaders demonstrate moderate levels of both behaviours, with subordinates more satisfied by leaders with high socio-emotional behaviours (Black & Porter, 2000). Leadership in context, and particularly the work by Fiedler (1967), suggests that flexibility in leadership behaviour from autocratic to participative depends on the context. For Fiedler (1967) there needed to be a match between
the individual traits and their situation.

Contemporary leadership approaches have defined concepts of transformational and transactional leadership. Transformational leaders often exhibit a charismatic style, have vision, are risk-takers, and usually see themselves as agents of major change. According to Robbins, Millet and Waters-Marsh (2004) these leaders are able to arouse, excite and inspire their followers to achieve group goals. This approach has resonance with the ‘great person’ or ‘great man’ trait approach and has been influential in social perceptions of what defines leadership. Transactional leadership rewards workers for their achievements and is concerned about improving working conditions and benefits and providing more engaging working conditions. These leaders engage in shared decision-making and develop teams. Their success is somewhat dependent upon the followers’ perceptions of the leader’s ability (Schultz & Schultz, 1998). This style is more pragmatic than that of the transformational leader but not exclusive, and both approaches make a contribution to leadership understandings.

The terms visionary leadership and charismatic leadership are now also part of contemporary leadership discussions. According to Nanus (1992), the visionary leader sees what is possible and desirable, is able to communicate their vision and persuade others to commit to make the vision a reality. The charismatic leader inspires and influences others and communicates high expectations.

More recently, feminist perspectives are focusing on leadership and questions are being asked about traditional concepts. According to authors such as Collinson and Hearn (2003) and Hill and Ragland (1995), these traditional concepts have been defined in male terms. Sinclair’s (1998) work suggests that leadership has been linked to male traits and consequently marginalises many females. In discussing leadership in the corporate world, Sinclair (1998, p. 320) states that:

These archetypes of corporate leadership derive from embedded cultural stories and icons; they continue to pervade the supposedly objective assessment of leadership potential in our organisations. And threaded through these archetypes are emblems of masculinity … rites of passage, in the language of combat and sport, in-jokes and assertions and demonstration of sexual and physical prowess.

The stoic, hardworking and heroic image of the leader is, according to Collinson and Hearn (2003) and Wajcman (1999), associated with authoritarian, competitive and independent notions of leadership. The dominance of such images has marginalised many females from leadership and made it problematic when women do enact leadership. In its enactment, women need to contest the perception that females do not possess characteristics such as logic and toughness, while also suggesting that these are not the only qualities valuable for effective leadership.

According to Horner (2003), leadership is moving towards a team-based environment where there is less focus on the leader and the follower and more on the process of leadership. These authors cite the work of Drath and Palus (1994), who suggest studying the social process that happens with groups of people who are engaged in an activity together’ (p. 35). Here leadership involves coordinating the efforts of the group in moving together, with all participants playing an active role. In such a leadership landscape, the process of supporting the team demands collaboration and openness in order to achieve a shared meaning that elicits commitment from group members. Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2001) discuss group and team leadership and highlight the need for goals which are understood by all participants. ‘Common or at least harmonious goals or purposes are, therefore, not criteria of groups, but of effective groups’ (p. 318). Blake, Mouton and Allen (1987) discuss the potential for team synergy when the interaction in a team transcends the contribution possible by individuals creating ‘spectacular teamwork’ (p. 6). However, these authors acknowledge the need for vision, and the consequence of its absence for a team can mean ‘it will drift from day to day in a survival mode’ (p. 5). This approach has implications for later discussion of leadership understandings in ECEC. Discontinuities emerge between the team-based leadership literature and the interpretation of this notion by participants in this study.

Leadership in education has focused in the main on notions of context and leadership beyond those of positions such as principal. Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001) suggest that distributed leadership views teachers as potential leaders, however; York-Barr and Duke (2004) refer to a number of studies which indicate that reality reflects more traditional forms of one-person leadership, suggesting that traditional models of leadership continue to have currency in school settings.

Until recently, leadership in the Australian field of early childhood education and care had not been widely...
researched. Leadership research revolved mainly around the work of Rodd (1998), Stonehouse (1994) and Hayden (1996), although recently Boardman (2003), Boyd (2001), Geoghegan, Petriwskyj, Bower and Geoghegan (2003), Nupponen (2001), Stamopolous (2003) and Waniganayake (2000) have examined leadership in various ECEC contexts. Such research has elucidated issues around leadership in ECEC which include incongruence between the rhetoric of democratic governance with the reality of traditional line management approaches. There is recognition of ECEC personnel drawing on an eclectic mix of traits and behaviours in their enactment of leadership. Carter and Curtis (1998) provide an ECEC interpretation of visionary leadership with a model that includes attention to three areas. These are leadership involving managing and overseeing; coaching and mentoring; and building and supporting community. Literature in ECEC leadership has in the main focused on specific contexts, while this present study sought to explore broader understandings of leadership from multiple ECEC contexts and variously trained professionals to understand their interpretations of leadership.

Methodology
The principal research question in this study focused on how ECEC personnel understand leadership and its enactment within the field. Specific interview questions afforded participants the opportunity to explore their own understandings of leadership and to reflect and comment on how they see leadership enacted within their field, well beyond their own service context. This provided the potential to understand what informs leadership ideas and if these are factors external and/or internal to the field. I was interested to see how influential traditional notions of leadership are informing ECEC personnel in their definitions of leadership. I was also interested to understand how these participants see leadership enacted within and for the ECEC field. How do the understandings of leadership align or contradict with the enactment of leadership as understood by these ECEC personnel? Are there tensions and discontinuities or is leadership a clearly defined and coherent notion within the field? Given the highly feminised nature of the ECEC field, how is a notion of leadership so heavily imbued with traditional heroic male dominant constructs of leadership interpreted by these participants?

In seeking a research design which would afford the exploration of these issues I identified a qualitative approach and, in particular, the use of symbolic interactionism as a methodological tool. Symbolic interactionism involves the study of individuals in society and what impacts on their own subjective insights and feelings. Importantly, symbolic interactionism maintains that individuals structure their external world by their perceptions and interpretations of what they conceive that world to be (Benzie & Allen, 2001). George Herbert Mead is considered the father of symbolic interactionism and his work was later developed by Blumer (1969), who provided a conceptual frame around which a significant amount of interpretative/ethnographic research has been conducted over the past century. According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism involves interpretation of the actions or remarks of another person and how one is to act. It is through this process that participants fit their own acts to the ongoing acts of one another and guide others in doing so. Mead (1934) asserted that individuals develop socially by entering into their community and coming to recognise the conditions that determine thought and practice. It is the individual who modifies the social influences through their interpretation of the particular context. Consequently, this methodological tool affords the opportunity to view how ECEC personnel interpret leadership influenced by social factors and cultural aspects in the ECEC field. The individual is an active agent, not passively responding to social forces but undergoing the experience, and also being aware of the experience.

Appreciation of feminist theory was pertinent to this study, given the highly feminised nature of the ECEC field. Feminist theory assists in unpacking some of the taken-for-granted aspects of the ECEC field as well as the heroic, male dominance of the leadership literature. Feminist authors make problematic leadership as being historically and culturally associated with men. According to Wajcman (1999), leadership ‘is seen as intrinsically masculine, something that only men do. The very language of management is resolutely masculine’ (p. 7). This study sought to ask questions about these notions through exploring how leadership is understood and enacted in a highly feminised field. What role do traditional notions of leadership play in the enactment of leadership?

Data collection
To address the research question in a way that is consistent with symbolic interactionist data collection methods, interviews and focus groups were used as
the main means to gather data. In addition, during the interviews I asked the participants if there were any materials they accessed and used to inform their understandings of leadership. These artefacts were accessed or acquired in some cases and their relevance to participants’ understandings of leadership explored in the analysis. In total, I conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with participants from a range of ECEC services. Of the 26 interviews, 16 participants were from a regional area and the remaining 10 were from New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania. Participants included long day care directors, family day care coordinators, early childhood undergraduate students, early childhood academics, preschool directors, and people working in organisations associated with the provision of services for children and families. The interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and later transcribed. Emerging themes were coded, and categories emerged related to the research questions. The interviews were also saved as audio-text on the computer.

The findings

Analysis of the data revealed two interrelated categories, the first being Interpreted Professional Identity and the second Interpreted Leadership Capacity, and I propose that the interpretation of one’s professional identity is linked to one’s interpreted leadership capacity. In other words, I am suggesting that this data and analysis indicates that the capacity of participants to enact leadership is influenced by their own interpretation of their professional identity.

Interpreted professional identity emerged from the participants’ accounts of the ECEC field and the wider community. It involves how individuals interpret the expectations of these cultures in terms of their individual sense of self. It became apparent that, for many participants, their own professional sense of self is informed by multiple factors, some of which they recognise as external to the ECEC field and others as evident within the field itself. In addition, participants recognise incongruence between leadership beyond ECEC and leadership within the field, and this made apparent tensions about how leadership is understood and enacted. The interpretation of social expectations which require nurturance and care in ECEC personnel appeared as somewhat incompatible with the requirements for leadership as understood by many participants. The interpretation of others’ views creates uncertainties for some participants about their own professional identity. The discourse of niceness continues to pervade images of what is required of ECEC personnel, and for participants this was a leadership inhibitor. For participants there were limited images of how to be an ECEC leader, and, for the early childhood student participants, this was a notable absence since they had few images with which to inform their own emerging professional identity.

For participants in this study, their interpretation of the ECEC culture impacts significantly on their ability to enact leadership. They articulated this for themselves and recounted how they saw this happen for others. I will elaborate on this in more depth by providing some rich data to illustrate the power of such interpretations and its inhibiting effect on ECEC leadership.

Interpreted Professional Identity is influenced by factors external to the ECEC field as well as by internal or cultural aspects of the field. Participants identified numerous factors external to the field as significant to their professional identity. In other words, I am suggesting that this data and analysis indicates that the capacity of participants to enact leadership is influenced by their own interpretation of their professional identity.

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Interpreted Professional Identity is influenced by factors external to the ECEC field as well as by internal or cultural aspects of the field. Participants identified numerous factors external to the field as significant to their professional identity. These comments, by others, were recounted by participants and, while they themselves held an intrinsic belief in the value of their work in ECEC, these external values played a powerful role in influencing participants’ understandings of themselves as professionals. In many cases participants’ interpretations of their sense of self (and their professional identity) were strongly influenced by the views of others. This did not manifest into a robust image of themselves as professionals. A relationship between the interpretation of factors external to the ECEC field (such as remuneration levels and low social kudos) and aspects of horizontal violence will be explored later in this paper.

One of the most notable factors internal to the ECEC field was the expectation that leadership be enacted in a non-hierarchical manner. Participants’ understandings of leadership in ECEC were strongly articulated along the lines of a team-based leadership approach. Participants interpret their field as requiring an approach to leadership that is more dispersed amongst numerous workers, and those in positional leadership

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**Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of data analysis**

[Diagram showing the relationship between Interpreted Professional Identity and Interpreted Leadership Capacity, with External Influences and Internal Cultural Influences as factors.]
roles are expected to ‘not be too much the boss’. One early childhood academic stated that ‘in early childhood ... we want to be seen as one of the team a little bit more than the all-powerful one that makes all the ultimate decisions’. According to the director of a long day care centre, ‘I think as a leader you have to be part of the team as well.’ For a preschool teacher leadership meant that you ‘don’t have to be the “top dog”’ and ‘you don’t want to be too much of the person in charge’ … in case ‘it puts the staff off.’ One early childhood academic recounted a personal experience when she stated:

What I probably see as the biggest problem for good leadership or effective leadership is that people … like if there’s a director of a centre or they’re in a leadership role, they like to be seen as one of the team players or one of the gang and if there are any privileges or anything that stands them out separately they quickly adjust and pretend they are one of the team again.

For this participant, being part of the team can be problematic. She sees it demanding a conformity that prevents notoriety often associated with leadership. Leadership enactment emerges as non-positional in many respects, and this is congruent with what participants describe as a pervading culture of niceness. Niceness surfaces as an ironic category with links to compliance and other behaviours. Although Not Just Nice Ladies by Anne Stonehouse was published in 1994, the discourse of niceness continues as a powerful expectation. Participants illustrated this when they made the following comments. ‘We’re the soft option for being a teacher … I still think we’re those nice ladies in pearls’. In addition, there were other specific references to the notion of niceness when another participant noted, ‘There’s niceness there indirectly, directly, it’s there and in a way you’re swayed into being you know nice, nice, nice. I reckon it’s at odds with us as a profession.’ Work by Griffin (1995, as cited by York-Barr & Duke, 2004) on leadership inactivity in school contexts identified a similar behaviour or what he terms ‘politesse’, where teachers were reluctant to draw attention to the shortcomings of other teachers lest such attention would be generalised to the whole group.

So what are the implications of this team-based leadership expectation and the lingering discourse of niceness? For participants, this cultural expectation of niceness demands a degree of compliance. This is evident in the following comment by an early childhood academic: ‘I see that they [EC services] are little environments of conformity and of course like minded ideas group together.’ Similarly, a comment from a participant working in a support organisation elaborates this point: ‘If someone is getting a little too confident, there is this “you get back in your box,” because that’s not your position, that’s not your role … we can’t have that happening.’ Again from another participant, the comment that ‘I think it is your peers that … hold you back the most’ illustrates a need to comply with expectations in the ECEC field. For the director of a long day care centre, her concern was for a preschool teacher and how she was received within the staff team: ‘…some people were quite nasty to her … [they] have got particular points of view and get together and create their own little culture and they expect everyone else to be the same—it’s worrying isn’t it’. It seems ironic that, within a culture of niceness and an understanding of leadership as somewhat team-based or focused, such behaviours are possible or tolerable. These interpretations suggest a relationship to the notion of horizontal violence identified in nursing literature (Farrell, 2001; McKenna, Smith, Poole & Coverdale, 2003) as well as a relationship to the ‘crab bucket mentality’ articulated by Duke (1994). This has similarities to the work of York-Barr and Duke (2004), who suggest that ‘…one of the most prevailing norms in the teaching profession is egalitarianism which fosters the view that teachers who step up to leadership roles are stepping out of line’ (p. 272). Consequently, there emerges a relationship between cultural behaviours and the potential for individuals to enact leadership.

**Horizontal violence**

Horizontal violence is explored extensively in nursing literature as an attempt to explain staff conflict (Farrell, 2001). Specifically it is defined as ‘psychological harassment, which creates hostility, as opposed to physical aggression. This harassment involves verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, humiliation, excessive criticism, innuendo, exclusion, denial of access to opportunity, disinterest, discouragement and the withholding of information’ (McKenna, Smith, Poole & Coverdale, 2003, p. 92). Horizontal violence is related to self-concept development and in particular self-confidence and self-esteem. Randle (2003), in the nursing literature, links the construction of different selves to the social interaction people undertake and the feedback they receive. Are participants recognising a culture that is constrained by expectations of niceness but which manifests into aspects of horizontal violence as a result of low professional status?
A poignant account of a personal experience of horizontal violence is provided by an early childhood academic reflecting on her teaching career:

I did enter a childcare centre years ago and had a lot of confidence knocked out of me. If there was anything that was a bit different, which I did have some different practices, people would sort of, not tall poppy syndrome but—people would try and pull you apart because I wasn’t part of the normal culture. For example, you know, taking inside toys like dinosaurs outside got to be the big issue and I really basically I resigned over that. I worked for a city council not really very far from here and, um, the collective were very different to me and if the director of the centre was a little bit more visionary she could actually see where I was coming from and that differences are a good thing, you know. She could have helped me out but she didn’t; she was a lousy leader—she basically humiliated someone like myself who wanted to do things a bit differently—like simple things like bring all the drawing and all the painting materials and everything to the children’s level, just really basic things—every little thing was a big issue.

The director of a long day care centre provided a detailed account of an experience she witnessed:

I actually think I saw that kind of thing happening in our centre when I first got there with our new preschool teacher. Now she’s an outsider in a sense because she’s got different training to everyone else and there was a lot of things that other staff did, in, you know, quite subtle ways that, you know, made her uncomfortable and kind of kept her from expressing things or even attempting new things the way that she wanted to … Some people were quite nasty to her, which, I found out later but, you know, just in like derogatory comments or not including her in any social thing that was being organised for all the staff or, you know, just those things really. Some of them were quite overt but some of them were quite subtle things or just ignoring what she might have had to say or even just saying something about her program—and it is really where people don’t want someone to be a bit different.

And from an academic near retirement:

It’s often now older women because they’re people like me where we’re at the point where we are saying, ‘I don’t care now—I’m going to say it because this is important and, whether people like it or not, I’m going to say it, because we need to say these things for the profession.

Somewhat similar to the notion of horizontal violence, Duke (1994) defined the term ‘crab bucket mentality’. This was in the context of leadership in education, and he made use of this as a metaphor to explain what he identified as the prevailing norms of the culture of teaching that constrain leadership behaviour.

Anyone who has gone crabbing knows that it is unnecessary to cap a crab bucket because as soon as one crab tries to scuttle out, the others drag it back down. Some faculties function in the same way, actively resisting the efforts of any member to press beyond normal practice. Teacher leadership can hardly thrive in such circumstances (Duke, 1994, pp. 269-270).

This powerful metaphor by Duke (1994) correlates with the notion of horizontal violence. It suggests that, in education, cultures exist to constrain leadership by requirements for personnel to conform to accepted expectations. One participant in the present study referred to state organisations where people do a lot of ‘watching the person next to you to make sure they’re not getting too up themselves you know’. Another participant, on the subject of ECEC workers, suggested, ‘If someone is getting a little too confident, um, there is this you get back in your box because that’s not your position, that’s not your role;’ and facetiously added, ‘We can’t have that happening.’ These are examples of the crab bucket mentality and horizontal violence in action. An abdication of one’s place can apparently marginalise individuals, making leadership enactment problematic and potentially unattractive.

**Why horizontal violence and a crab bucket mentality?**

In this present study, there is resonance between the ECEC participants and nursing literature in terms of horizontal violence and ways this affects the culture of the field. This appears relevant to the formation of an individual’s interpreted professional identity based on expectations prevalent within the field. McKenna et al. (2003) investigated neophyte nurses’ experiences of horizontal violence and reported that, in the main, interpersonal conflict involved being undervalued by peers, having learning opportunities blocked, and feeling neglected and distressed by the conflict between others. Randle (2003) makes a link between the effects of horizontal violence and self-esteem. Randle’s study linked the construction of different ‘selves’ to the social interaction people undertake and the feedback they receive. While Randle (2003) does not refer here to symbolic interactionism, there is a connection with the present study. The nursing literature supports a relationship between workplace culture, self-concept
and confidence, and this is relevant to the suggestion that professional identity has links to ECEC leadership capacity. In addition, the notion suggested by Randle (2003), that self-esteem is a major predictor of behaviour, provides support for the concept that cultural aspects of the field can influence self-concept and consequently constrain an individual’s interpreted leadership capacity.

Do ECEC personnel demonstrate horizontal violence and the crab bucket mentality as the result of low self-esteem and confidence? Goffman’s work with restaurant personnel elicited the notion of “front” and “back” regions (1959, p. 107) to explore how the persona adopted by waiters, as they serve the public, contrasted with their attitude while back of house. This work illustrated that the performance the waiters provided for the client reflected an attitude not actually held by the staff. The staff, then, mount a collaborative performance to project themselves as the capable and committed deliverers of that service; they play back the clients’ own self-conceptions as the well-regarded, gratefully and gracefully serviced clients’ (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis, p. 141). In ‘back of house’, staff are able to express their alternative persona, reversing the relationship of servility and reinforcing their sense of self. This example illustrates symbolic interactionist concerns about how people involved in work which has a low or negative social esteem maintain their sense of self-worth ‘in a society which told them they were worthless individuals’ (Cuff et al., p. 140). What this suggests is that waiting staff express their own value behind the scenes by behaving in ways that demean the clients in order to assert themselves. It is possible that the horizontal violence acknowledged by many participants in this study is a demonstration of the frustration felt by ECEC personnel when they are required to conform to a discourse of niceness and its constraining expectations.

Those investigating horizontal violence link such behaviour to oppressed groups who lack power and consequently ‘attack one another in order to vent their frustration and anger with the system they find themselves in’ (Randle, 2003, p. 399). This behaviour is particularly relevant given Goffman’s assertion that the back-of-house behaviour is a means to reinforce a sense of self in a profession that has a low social standing (Cuff et al., 1984). Other aspects of this present study (reported in Hard, 2005) suggest that participants interpret factors external to the field as strong influences on their professional identity. The interpretation of low social kudos for ECEC was demonstrated in comments such as the following:

I mean, I can give an example. My daughter, years ago, commented at 15 that she went and looked after a child after school each night because his mother [was] a school teacher, an educated person, and when they went away she looked after the dog each night and they paid her more to feed the dog. What is this telling us?

The implication is that a perceived low social standing can contribute to a limited professional identity which can result in behaviours such as horizontal violence and the crab bucket mentality. These actions demand that others comply or risk marginalisation, and such a culture is not one in which leadership activity is encouraged or supported.

**Implications for ECEC leadership**

The discourse of niceness continues to pervade participants’ interpretations of the ECEC culture, yet the emergence of its antithesis in horizontal violence demands debate and discussion. Aspects of horizontal violence and crab bucket mentality manifest in behaviours which covertly and overtly marginalise others through demanding compliance with certain ways of being and acting. If such elements are part of the ECEC culture, as these participants suggest, then the outcome is likely to be limited leadership activity. Participants felt constrained in their activities in case they draw undue attention to themselves as individuals. The interpretation of a team-based leadership approach appears superficially to suggest a progressive and innovative leadership style which other spheres of leadership literature have explored only recently. However, this remains contentious given team-focused leadership literature discussed earlier which describes such leadership as involving an articulation of a vision or shared goals. The interpretation of team-based leadership by participants in this study was not couched in terms which involved specific vision or common articulated goals but, rather, may be an expectation of similarity and a lack of potential to challenge expected norms.

Rather than an egalitarian rationale, this team-based approach suggests an expectation of certain behaviours and aspirations which avoid individual notoriety. In itself this may be laudable. However, when it demands compliance to certain ways of acting and thinking it is constraining. The initial definition of leadership in this paper involved change in organisations, and this is difficult to achieve in a culture which does not support varied ideas and discussions. In a climate where effective
leadership is increasingly a measure of an organisation’s or a profession’s success, ECEC personnel might well consider alternative ways of acting. Discussions with undergraduate students showed that they too have already witnessed, if not directly experienced, horizontal violence on placements. Incorporating discussions of how the culture of ECEC can demand compliance and its implications for leadership could be an important element of undergraduate courses. Without conversations around such issues, leadership is unlikely to prosper, and strategic leadership for the field will not be supported. The pervading nature of this discourse is such that, without overt and deep exploration of how this activity occurs, the ECEC field will continue to crave leadership but be unable to provide the culture in which it can be fostered and flourish.

Conclusion
This study explored how leadership is understood and enacted within the field of ECEC. What emerges is a complex interplay of factors that interact in people’s understandings of leadership. In addition, the use of symbolic interactionism as a methodological tool helps to illustrate that individuals interpret their professional identity through their engagements with others, both within and beyond their field. These engagements have a powerful influence in assisting or constraining leadership aspirations and enactment. What emerges as a significant cultural factor is horizontal violence, which plays out in behaviours that exclude or marginalise those who do not conform to expected norms. In conjunction with Duke’s (1994) metaphor of the crab bucket mentality, horizontal violence illustrates a powerful constraint interpreted by participants. The challenge is to openly discuss this cultural expectation and the ways it is evident in behaviours in the field. Further, it is important to consider this as a non-productive and potentially destructive aspect which requires overt attention to avoid the ongoing constraints it puts upon leadership behaviour.

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THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT IN LONG DAY CARE: A ‘double-edged sword’ for early childhood professional practice

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While early childhood professionals in NSW are accountable to a substantial collection of regulatory requirements, little research has explored the outcomes of this regulatory environment, both intended and otherwise. This paper presents findings from a NSW study and shows how early childhood professionals working in long day care centres perceive the regulatory environment to impact on their professional practice. Specific attention is given to the impact of the national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System and the NSW Children’s Services Regulation. The notion of the regulatory environment as a ‘double-edged sword’ emerges as a useful conceptual metaphor to understand how early childhood professionals perceive these regulatory frameworks to impact on their practice. Findings show that the benefits afforded by accreditation and the Regulation are offset by unfulfilled intentions and unintended outcomes.

Introduction

In the current Australian political climate which promotes the early years as critical to lifelong learning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004), the risks to children exposed to substandard child care is heralded as being of paramount concern (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005a). Accordingly, the children’s services sector is underpinned by a substantial collection of regulatory requirements. In NSW, early childhood professionals in long day care (LDC) are required to comply with more than 40 legal and other regulatory requirements, at the forefront of which are the national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005a), and the NSW Children’s Services Regulation (NSW Department of Community Services, 2004).

This paper explores how early childhood professionals in LDC centres in NSW perceive QIAS and the Regulation to impact on their professional practice and capacity to provide quality care. Mindful that regulation does not always achieve its intended purpose and can in fact lead to ‘pervasive unexpected or spillover effects’ (Queralt & Witte, 1999, p. 111), our exploration examines whether QIAS and the Regulation are perceived to achieve their objectives and whether they lead to any unanticipated outcomes.

We are particularly interested in exploring how early childhood professionals perceive QIAS and the Regulation to impact on their professional decision-making. This interest stems from our recognition of early childhood teachers as professionals, and our belief that professional decision-making is fundamental to the provision of quality care. Goodfellow (2003, p. 49) notes that, as professionals, early childhood practitioners exercise practical wisdom, combining ‘expert knowledge with sound judgement and thoughtful action’. Yet notions of professional decision-making and practical wisdom are not readily identifiable in either QIAS (Goodfellow, 2003) or the Regulation.

In exploring the impact of regulatory systems on professional practice, we first provide a brief overview of the accreditation and Regulation frameworks. We then outline the benefits and shortcomings of these frameworks as raised in the limited existing literature. Next, we draw on qualitative focus group data to examine participants’ views on professional decision-making, and their perceptions of QIAS and the Regulation. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for policy and practice.
The regulatory environment overseeing LDC centres in NSW

Early childhood professionals in LDC centres across Australia are subject to a two-tiered regulatory framework, whereby a national accreditation system supplements state regulations (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002). QIAS aims to ‘provide children in centre based care throughout Australia with high quality care that best promotes their learning and development in the vital early years’ (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005a, p. 3). By addressing process variables that ‘determine’ quality (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005a, p. 15), QIAS seeks to extend quality standards beyond the baseline, structural dimensions of quality that are established by state regulations. In NSW, these regulations take the form of the 2004 Children’s Services’ Regulation (NSW Department of Community Services, 2004). Administered by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS), the Regulation aims to ‘ensure the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children in children’s services’ (Dawson, 2004).

QIAS and the Regulation are clearly positive in intent. Nonetheless, we premise this paper on the view that regulatory requirements are not in themselves guarantors of quality care. Drawing on research into the provision of quality care in early childhood settings (e.g. Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LaGrange & Tougas, 2000; Whitebook, Sakai & Howes, 2004), we maintain that quality care stems from a multiplicity of interconnecting variables. Structural and process dimensions of quality are two such variables. Equally important, however, in our view, are contextual and adult-work environment dimensions of quality, such as staff wages, goal consensus, the exercising of autonomy to make professional judgements, workload, and job satisfaction.

The literature is clear that high levels of stress and staff turnover are not conducive to responsive, positive and consistent interactions with children (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Goelman et al., 2000), and thus to the intended outcomes of QIAS and the Regulation. This seems particularly pertinent to the NSW early childhood teacher labour market which is marked by high staff-turnover rates and recruitment and retention difficulties (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2004; Warrilow, Fisher, Cummings, Sumson & a’Beckett, 2002).

Therefore, in addition to investigating how early childhood professionals perceive QIAS and the Regulation to directly impact on quality standards of care, we are also interested in exploring if these regulatory frameworks have unanticipated effects on professional practice as an adult-work quality dimension. Before outlining how our participants perceived this impact, we review available literature and research. This review highlights that realising the intended aims of both QIAS and the Regulation is problematic. The review also suggests that these regulatory systems generate deleterious spillover effects.

Accreditation and the Regulation—enhancers of professional practice and quality care?

Accreditation


These and other research and commentaries (Ashby & Grieshaber, 1996; Grieshaber, 2000; 2002; Grieshaber, Halliwell, Hatch & Walsh, 2000; Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002; Lyons, 1996; 1997; Shepherd, 2004) have, however, also identified QIAS as a barrier to professional practice. Concerns raised include a prescribing of ‘legitimate’ early childhood curriculum and discourse by QIAS; a narrowing and normalising of what constitutes ‘quality’ to a prescribed, technical list of outcomes; a limiting of autonomy in professional decision-making; child observations becoming focused on satisfying external audiences; difficulties securing parental involvement; demanding administrative requirements; a lack of time to cope with increased paperwork; and the amount of unpaid overtime required to meet QIAS requirements. Indeed, Lyons (2003, p. 9) asserts that accreditation is ‘exploitative’ because the effort required to complete the process is far from commensurate with practitioners’ pay and working conditions.

The concerns raised need to be interpreted with caution, however, given the limitations of the literature cited. Apart from the CCCAC review process, perspectives of early childhood professionals were investigated in only three studies: Grieshaber et al.
(2000), Jackson (1996) and Lyons (1997). The first two studies utilised small sample sizes, while the survey questions of the third focused on work conditions and job satisfaction. Murray (1996) notes the need to treat the Coopers and Lybrand’s evaluation of QIAS with caution, given its problematic methodology. Further, much of the literature on QIAS was written or based on research conducted prior to, or not long after, the 2001 revised accreditation system was introduced.

A revised QIAS containing ‘several substantive changes’ (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005a, p. 6), came into effect in January 2006. The review on which this new system was based, and the subsequent changes, however, have focused on ‘a reclassification of the quality standards outlined in the QIAS Source Book, 2001’ (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005a, p. 6). Indeed, the latest version has been promoted as ‘the reclassified Quality Improvement and Accreditation System’ (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005b, p. 1) and thus does not appear to have addressed the concerns outlined in previous reviews and research. It remains unclear; therefore, how early childhood professionals currently perceive QIAS to impact upon their professional practice and provision of quality care some 11 years after its inception.

The Regulation

Literature pertaining to the impact of DoCS’ administered regulations on early childhood professionals and their provision of quality care is largely confined to research undertaken following the issuing of the draft Children’s Services Regulation (NSW Department of Community Services, 2002). This draft Regulation proposed four key equipment and five significant operating changes (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2003), the latter including a reduced staff–child ratio from 1:5 to 1:4 for children under two years. A regulatory impact statement (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002) of this draft Regulation deemed statutory regulation to be the most appropriate form of regulatory accountability, a position which the early childhood sector overwhelmingly supported (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002). As is acknowledged in the regulatory impact statement, however, the focus of the review was confined to ‘the impact of proposed changes upon competition’ (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002, p. 146), and required sector consultation before an overall assessment of the net public benefits could be ascertained. PriceWaterhouseCoopers undertook such consultation in their evaluation of the draft Regulation, and concluded not only that ‘the draft Regulation implements standards which reflect the conditions recommended by professional groups and found by research to be necessary for good quality childcare programs’ (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2003, p. v), but also that ‘cost benefit analyses on early childhood programs indicate that the benefits of implementing conditions proposed under the draft Regulation outweigh the cost of program provision’ (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2003, p. 28).

Significantly, the new Children’s Services Regulation (NSW Department of Community Services, 2004) did not incorporate the proposed staff–child ratio for children under two years. The existing ratio, together with the teachers shortage interim policy, have been cited as having a detrimental impact on work conditions and quality standards of care (Fisher & Patulny, 2004; Purcal & Fisher, 2004).

A more recent study (Bown, 2005) used visual arts media such as photography to explore how three early childhood professionals in NSW early childhood settings experienced the Regulation. While the three participants perceived the Regulation to guide their practice and, at times, support their decision-making, they also drew attention to ways the Regulation adversely affected their professional practice. These effects included a developing culture of mistrust within the centre and with DoCS; a constraining of teachers’ professional judgement; a limiting of pedagogy and quality experiences for children; a devaluing of teacher expertise; and a frustrating of practice because of ambiguous and inconsistent interpretations of specific requirements by the department.

The study

This article aims to extend previous research on QIAS and the Regulation by presenting findings from the second phase of a statewide study investigating how early childhood professionals working in NSW LDC perceive the regulatory environment to impact on their professional practice and provision of quality care. While data collection for this study was conducted prior to the 2005 QIAS Quality Practices Guide and the 2004 Regulation coming into effect, we believe our findings are nonetheless relevant given that revisions to both regulatory systems have not addressed the concerns raised in the literature.

Findings pertaining to the Regulation, however, will be interpreted in light of the new approach DoCS will
adopt when the new Regulation takes effect for existing services in 2006. This approach signifies 'a move away from a prescriptive regulatory regime, where the responsibility for ensuring compliance rested with DoCS, to a system where service providers have to guarantee and take responsibility for service compliance' (Mallett, 2005).

Method

Seven focus group discussions were held between September and October 2004. Six groups were held in Sydney and one in a large regional city. The 54 participants were female, university-qualified early childhood teachers (100%) predominantly from not-for-profit centres (88.9%). Most were employed in a primarily management role (83.3%) and had at least six years’ experience in the field (77.8%; 44.4% had more than 10 years’ experience).

Each group discussion addressed five topic areas:

1. What is professional decision-making?
2. How does the regulatory environment affect your professional decision-making?
3. How does the regulatory environment affect your capacity to provide quality care?
4. Other ways the regulatory environment affects you.
5. Towards an improved regulatory environment.

Each discussion was audio-taped and points raised were recorded by a moderator’s assistant. To increase the credibility of data generated, the moderator reviewed these notes with participants at the end of each session. Points were confirmed and/or modified to verify that what was documented captured the intended meaning of what had been said.

Analysis of each data set began by locating and transforming responses to each of the five topic areas into key themes, and identifying the frequency with which each theme was raised over the seven groups. Themes raised in at least a majority of discussion groups were then merged to provide a general collective account of how the regulatory environment is experienced by these early childhood professionals. This account was then analysed as a ‘collaborative construction of meaning’ (Hollander, 2004, p. 632). Responses from each focus group relevant to the themes in this account were then transcribed.

Findings

The metaphor of a ‘double-edged sword’, used by one focus group participant, encapsulates how participants perceived QIAS and the Regulation to impact on their professional practice. Metaphors are useful tools to illustrate and illuminate the meaning of what one wants others to understand (Ely,Vinz, Anzul & Downing, 1997). In providing a visual image, metaphors can also lead the reader or listener to powerfully engage with what is being described (Ely et al., 1997).

The double-edged sword metaphor highlights that both QIAS and the Regulation have concurrent benefits and drawbacks for early childhood professional practice. It succinctly and powerfully conveys participants’ perceptions that these regulatory systems facilitate and enhance their professional practice while concurrently restricting and damaging it.

The following section presents the collective account that emerged from the focus groups. We first outline participants’ views as to what constitutes professional decision-making. Then we elucidate the double-edged sword metaphor by showing how participants perceive QIAS and the Regulation to impact on their capacity to engage in professional decision-making and provide quality care.

Professional decision-making

All participants asserted that they constantly engaged in professional decision-making, and that the regulatory environment informs their decisions. References were made to how regulatory requirements are consciously and unconsciously referred to when, for example, rostering, speaking with parents, inspecting the playground, programming, or considering notifying DoCS of a child protection issue.

However, participants also maintained that their decisions stemmed from a context of ‘knowing’ that included, but extended beyond, the regulatory environment. Judgements are made with reference, for example, to children’s individual needs and interests, relationships with parents, available resources, and the needs and abilities of staff. This ‘knowing’ is integrated with respondents’ own knowledge-base, philosophy, experience, vision and common sense, and an informed decision is then made.

The following example illustrates how practical wisdom is exercised in the professional decision-making of early childhood practitioners. Here, a director explains how she dealt with a situation where, despite repeated expressed concerns by staff to parents, a baby continued to present with severe nappy rash:

I could have picked up the phone and made a report to DoCS … I was torn in a sense … but I knew they [the parents] didn’t understand … You can report it, but isn’t
it better to approach the parents? She’s a young 17-year-old. Doesn’t really have any family support to help her out ... I feel I made the right decision [on the basis of] knowing the parent, knowing them and how they were, and just the relationship I have with the parents. I didn’t want to overstep that either ... Just my instinct told me ... I felt I did the right thing ... she needed to have the education, honestly, she just did not know ... Now I notice she comes and asks for advice. My relationship with her has improved dramatically. (FG1)

This director evaluated her accountability to DoCS in light of her knowledge of the particular needs of this parent, her own professional values (establishing trusting, collaborative relationships with parents), her perceived role as educator and carer of parents as well as of children, and her own ‘gut feeling’. In this situation, this director was able to make a professional decision in a way that gave appropriate reference to regulatory requirements while also maintaining integrity with her practical wisdom. Whether this is the case generally for focus group participants will be explored in the following sections.

QIAS and the Regulation: Working for professional practice
Participants perceived QIAS and the Regulation as providing a two-tiered regulatory framework that establishes standards, guides professional practice, and legitimately protects children, families and early childhood professionals:

Regs get us to base level. QIAS builds on that. (FG6)

You have to have them. You have to, because if you don’t, there are a lot of services that would just ... You have to have them in order to protect the general public, the children, and the families. (FG7)

At the end of the day I’m glad the regulations are there because I think they guide us and they protect us. (FG4)

Common to this notion of protection was the power QIAS and the Regulation affords early childhood professionals. This power was derived from two aspects of the regulatory requirements, the first being QIAS’s raising of the professional esteem of early childhood professionals:

QIAS allows parents to see what you’re doing. Parents realise how much everyone works and how much training and knowledge they have. It educates parents a lot. (FG6)

It [QIAS] gives you credibility as an organisation. (FG2)

That the Regulation is statutory legislation also enhanced the power base by which participants could engage in professional decision-making:

I think it’s made my life as a director in one sense easier because you have a written document that is the law. The regulations and OH&S, they’re the law. It’s not me just being the meanie and saying ‘you have to do that because I said so’. (FG7)

You need the guidelines to say ‘Look, this is the rule’ ... They back you up. (FG1)

One authorised supervisor spoke of how she used the Regulation to resist pressure from the centre’s owner to introduce staff–child ratios that were below those stipulated in the legislation:

If I hadn’t been able to use the licensing guidelines anything could have happened. (FG3)

These responses illustrate the complex and at times stressful nature of decision-making. Within this context, however, QIAS and the Regulation can provide early childhood professionals with power, confidence and direction. This is particularly the case when practitioners perceive requirements to be consistent with the broader contextual variables that constitute their practical wisdom.

QIAS and the Regulation: Working against professional practice
Findings thus far show that QIAS and the Regulation can and do facilitate professional practice. However, counteracting these perceived benefits are unfulfilled intentions and unintended spillover effects which participants identified as adversely affecting their professional practice.

Unfulfilled intentions
As noted earlier, the intent of QIAS is to lift quality practices beyond the standards prescribed by the Regulation. However, participants identified two key areas of QIAS—its impact on staff–parent relationships, and its viewing and measuring of quality—as impeding this intention. Participants also voiced concerns as to whether standards embodied in the Regulation constitute minimum structural quality.

(i) QIAS: Staff–parent relationships
Participants in most focus groups believed QIAS impeded their relationships with parents. The following quote exemplifies participants’ concerns that QIAS can strain relationships with parents and undermine parents’ trust in staff’s expertise:
Having to consult with parents every time you want to introduce or review a policy, I think says to parents 'you're not professional enough to make a decision'. (FG4)

In the context of professional decision-making, the impact of this concern is significant. Working collaboratively with parents can enhance early childhood professionals' knowledge of the child and their familial context, thus strengthening the practical wisdom from which autonomous, flexible decisions can be made.

(ii) QIAS: Defining and measuring quality
Participants also identified QIAS's viewing and measuring of quality as problematic:

I don’t think you can prove quality on paper. You need to be in the room watching the staff. So you can’t stay in an office for a day-and-a-half, ticking off little boxes saying 'well, prove to me where you talked to the children about seasons, prove to me where you did this, prove to me where you introduced that'. They need to be in there, in the room watching the interactions between the staff and the children, which is the basis of quality care, not whether or not you’ve got all these little boxes ticked. (FG5)

The little tick-a-boxes seems a bit shallow when you think about what we are doing every day. I guess at that level it’s very frustrating. (FG5)

I fluctuate between going ‘I think I’ve got a quality service. I think we do this really well’ to thinking, ‘Oh my goodness, but I haven’t got something in my folders that says I’ve given notification to my families or that says I’ve given something to my families about safe furniture in the home.’ (FG4)

These perceptions illustrate that QIAS has the potential to negate the complexities that constitute professional decision-making and quality care, and undermine early childhood professionals’ confidence in their own professional practice. A question here, of course, is whether as a consequence quality practices become oriented to ‘little boxes being ticked’ and professional decision-making reduced to technical practices.

(iii) The Regulation—minimum standards
Participants across all focus groups believed that not all standards in the Regulation are in keeping with current research, facilitate current pedagogical approaches, or equate to minimum structural quality standards. In particular, the failure to introduce the proposed 1:4 staff–child ratio for children under two years in the 2004 Regulation was a shared frustration:

I think it’s disgusting that the 1:4 ratio didn’t come in. We have a 1:3 ratio and at the beginning of the year we have a 1:2 ratio to settle babies in. And I just think how could they have allowed the 1:5 ratio if the whole point of the regulatory environment is to provide minimum standards? (FG3)

You’re doing this emergent curriculum; you need more staff on the floor to be able to do the interactions! It’s [the Regulation] not keeping up with the times. (FG1)

Early childhood professionals’ commitment to quality education and care can be seriously thwarted by regulatory standards that do not constitute minimum structural quality and which are perceived to lack the structural backbone necessary to support their professional practice. While some services may go beyond requirements in the Regulation, quality standards become vulnerable to the philosophy and priorities of the centre’s management. In this way, the power QIAS and the Regulation affords early childhood professionals is diluted.

Unanticipated spillover effects
As noted earlier, regulatory accountabilities can lead to unexpected outcomes. Focus group participants identified issues of time, professional autonomy, and risk management as being three spillover effects of QIAS and the Regulation that impeded their professional practice.

(i) Time
Participants overwhelmingly found that fulfilling accreditation and Regulation requirements had an acutely detrimental impact on their time:

There’s so much of it! I actually enjoy the way we’re documenting things with the emergent curriculum. I find it more enjoyable and I think the parents have never been as informed about what the children are doing, but I think the accreditation documentation is the killer. (FG2)

There’s so much repetitive documentation—I’d like to know why! Why must my staff person who’s been child protection rated, now must be child protection rated AGAIN, just by a different agency? (FG3)

These quotes are indicative of the pressure felt by participants to complete what they perceive to be excessive, unnecessary and repetitive audit requirements. This in turn can impact on job satisfaction, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Today I had a staff member who injured themselves and in the Regs, OH&S, there’s a very big thing about what
you do. And there's all that paperwork! There's so much and I'm thinking 'that'll take me three hours when I get home tonight'. (FG1)

Everyone here loves teaching, that's why you're in it, so it [the Regulation] takes you away from teaching and developing curriculum and extending the staff in your room. So while you're doing the day-to-day things to keep DoCS happy, it's taking you away from your core business. (FG6)

I think it's [paperwork requirements] very time-consuming and I do think it takes away the trust of others in our professionalism. I think once we were considered that what we were saying was true. Now you have to prove everything, which is a bit insulting when you think about it. (FG5)

This issue of time thus presents a significant unintended, detrimental outcome of both regulatory systems. QIAS and the Regulation were perceived to require onerous documentation requirements which, in many ways, undermined job satisfaction. Work often had to be completed at home, unpaid. Much time had to be spent in the office, away from the children and away from other staff. Fulfilling these accountabilities also threatened to diminish a sense of professional competence in oneself and from others.

These stressors threaten quality practices, and thus undermine the intent of QIAS and the Regulation, in two ways. First, in inducing stress and job dissatisfaction, accountability requirements can impede the capacity of early childhood professionals to engage in quality interactions with children and parents. Second, the magnitude of time pressures, particularly when juxtaposed with low wages, may contribute to the labour market issues that plague the childcare sector and impede quality standards of care.

(ii) Professional autonomy

For participants in all focus groups, QIAS and, to a lesser extent, the Regulation were perceived to be open to interpretation. However, most participants at times experienced validators from NCAC and Children’s Services Advisors (CSAs) from DoCS as overly critical, unsupported authority figures who imposed their own subjective and inflexible interpretation of requirements:

Accreditation? They don't listen. (FG6)

If your validator for accreditation, if that person doesn’t know, or has a different understanding of the project, then that can be your downfall. Same for DoCS if your adviser has a different understanding to a past one. (FG2)

She [the CSA] didn’t challenge what we were doing. It was more criticising. She didn’t say, ‘Well, why do you do it like this?’ It was just wrong. It really put us a couple of steps backwards. (FG5)

These responses remind us of the notion of wise practice, and how participants make professional judgements within a context of ‘knowing’. Fundamental to this process is having the professional autonomy to implement these judgements. These quotes suggest that the review processes for both QIAS and the Regulation can impede this autonomy, particularly when these accountabilities conflict with other elements of respondents’ decision-making fabric. In this way, these regulatory systems can undermine the professional expertise of participants and thus again provide a potential source of job dissatisfaction.

(iii) Risk management

Another unanticipated outcome was participants’ overwhelming concern that the Regulation overemphasised risk, to the detriment of children’s learning experiences and general wellbeing:

I think we have to provide a cotton wool environment, you know. The kids aren’t allowed to be kids a lot. (FG4)

All the equipment has become so supersafe that the children don’t have any risk-taking activities. (FG7)

I am using an emergent curriculum and trying to adopt some of the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, and I went to Italy and saw what they did there and the activities they provide for young children, and I think if I had any of that in my centre I would be out the door. They do have regulations but they’re not as stringent, they’re not as prescriptive … And I think we are so restricted by things like safety and all of these sorts of things all of the time that it really restricts your pedagogy. (FG4)

These responses reflect the challenge that faces all early childhood professionals: how to implement quality, professional practices within the context of a regulatory environment. In doing so, however, these comments position the regulatory environment as both a product and producer of cultural beliefs and practices around what constitutes ‘risks’ and ‘quality experiences’ for children.

Discussion

In considering whether QIAS and the Regulation fulfil their respective objectives of ensuring quality experiences for children and, in the process, generate any spillover effects, this study shows that early
childhood professionals depict these regulatory systems as ‘double-edged swords’. On the one hand, they are an essential ‘weapon’ that protects children and informs and supports professional practice. On the other, both QIAS and the Regulation present as ‘dangers’ to children and early childhood professionals. Both are seen to fall short of meeting their broad objectives and both are perceived to have unintended and deleterious consequences on early childhood professionals’ capacity to engage in professional, quality practices.

For this study’s participants, the potential of these regulatory systems to ensure quality experiences and outcomes for children are impeded by the simplistic, technical approach to quality that underpins QIAS, and by Regulation standards perceived to not be in keeping with current research and pedagogical practices. Further, participants’ capacity to apply practical wisdom in their professional decision-making was seen to be limited by significant spillover effects: the time needed to fulfil accountability requirements; discouraging and disempowering review visits; QIAS’s potential to impede staff–parent relationships; and the Regulation’s overemphasis on excessive risk management. In these ways, this study confirms and extends those concerns raised by previous research. Moreover, our findings indicate that shortcomings of both QIAS and the Regulation remain despite recent revisions to both regulatory systems.

Significantly, participants in all focus groups remained supportive of the intent of QIAS and the Regulation. Participants’ perceptions, however, clearly highlight the need for policy reform that addresses the limitations and adverse consequences of these regulatory systems. Such reform would need to embrace a broader conceptualisation of quality, and address those issues pertaining to the structural, process and adult-work dimensions of quality that this study has identified.

It remains to be seen how the Regulation’s shift of requiring service providers to ensure compliance will affect the benefits and shortcomings of the Regulation, as identified in this research. There seems potential for early childhood professionals to have, on the one hand, greater scope to exercise autonomy in their decision-making. Yet just as likely are other possible deleterious scenarios. For example, projecting CSAs as ‘compliance monitors’ may lessen the likelihood of early childhood professionals developing supportive, collaborative relationships with their CSAs; while having to prove compliance may exacerbate practitioners’ felt need to keep more comprehensive ‘audit trails’, thereby potentially exacerbating levels of stress and job dissatisfaction. In these ways, the new Regulation may well continue to be the double-edged sword that focus group participants perceive it to be.

As double-edged swords, QIAS and the Regulation are mediums through which power is contested. Who and what determines which way these swords swing, and whose interests they will serve? Drawing on Foucault’s notion of power, MacNaughton (2005, p. 27) asserts that ‘power is a relationship of struggle over how we use truths and build discourses about normality to produce and regulate ourselves, our relationships and our institutions, especially our production of normality’. In this light, our findings present as much a challenge to early childhood professionals as they do to regulatory bodies. What can practitioners do, and what are practitioners doing, to maximise the potential of these regulatory swords to work for the interests of children, their families, and the early childhood profession? These are pertinent questions given that the power these swords have and the enticements they offer—being licensed and publicly acknowledged as an accredited and therefore ‘quality’ service—threaten to lead early childhood professionals to simplify and orient their decision-making practices around accountability frameworks.

Goodfellow (2001; 2003) has called on early childhood professionals to develop an intimate awareness of themselves as wise practitioners, and to confidently articulate this identity to others. Whether early childhood professionals have taken up this challenge and exercise modes of resistance within the context of the regulatory environment, to ensure the integrity of their practical wisdom, is worth further investigation. The possibility that early childhood professionals may be acquiescing to the demands of regulatory bodies at the expense of their practical wisdom also presents as an important area of future research.

Finally, our findings appear to expose some validators and CSAs as lacking practical wisdom in their decision-making practices. Without the scope, expertise, motivation and support to develop a ‘knowing’ of individual centres, validators and CSAs are likely to base their judgements primarily on technical knowledge. Such an approach, we believe, is problematic. As noted by Frowe (2005, p. 45), professional judgement ‘is resistant to systematic formulation as a series of propositions’ and, as we have seen, such resistance manifests as spillover effects that are detrimental to the intended goals of regulatory accountabilities.
As a way forward, it would appear that greater dialogue between early childhood professionals and their respective validators/CSAs needs to become fundamental to review processes. Frowe’s (2005) discussion of professional trust, and the legitimate claim of professionals to autonomy in decision-making, provides some insight as to what this dialogue might look like: collaborative, open-ended conversations where decisions are articulated and justified within a context of knowing, and where relationships of trust in and respect for one’s practical wisdom can be developed.

In the current regulatory climate, this shift to more collaborative, trusting relationships between early childhood professionals and their validators/CSAs may appear a formidable challenge. Yet preliminary analysis of data generated from the interview phase of our study suggests that some early childhood professionals indeed have such dialogue with their reviewers. The contextual variables that make this relationship possible warrant further investigation.

**Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted what early childhood professionals in our study perceive to be the benefits and shortcomings of the two key regulatory frameworks that oversee children’s services. One participant’s likening of the regulatory environment as a ‘double-edged sword’ encapsulates respondents’ perceptions of the dual impact of QIAS and the Regulation on quality, professional practices in LDC. While endorsing the need for public accountability, the task remains for early childhood professionals to challenge and engage with these regulatory systems in ways that allow the integrity of their practical wisdom to be articulated, upheld and respected. This challenge seems particularly pertinent given that the recently revised QIAS and Regulation do not address the key concerns raised in this study.

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**References**


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