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Editorial

EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA has as its mission the aim to advocate and ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years. One of the strategies used to work towards this aim is the publication of the Australian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC). AJEC publishes evidence-based articles designed to share new information with readers. It also aims to encourage the critical exchange of ideas among early childhood practitioners, academics and students.

Traditionally we have thought of our audience as Australia based, and AJEC has attempted to provide an Australian angle to the articles published. However, just as ‘no man is an island’, no longer can we see ourselves as an isolated microcosm with our own concerns and issues, different in many ways from those in the world outside of our isolated bubble. We all know that technology has made the world a smaller place, and has challenged us to widen our thinking to include other people and other places. In reality, the debates about quality, social justice and equity held around the world are an integral part of the debates we are having in Australia about these very issues. In reflection of this, the AJEC Committee have begun to actively seek input from academics, early childhood practitioners and students outside of Australia. We involve people through membership in the committee, and are attempting to encourage submission of work from a wide range of sources outside of Australia.

As well as publishing material from different parts of the world, the committee are considering a name change for the journal to clearly identify our aim to broaden our appeal to those living and working outside Australia. Many people are very happy with the acronym AJEC and would be reluctant to lose the identity that they have associated with this name. One possibility worth considering that makes minimal changes to the name, but also shapes a new image that is more inclusive of those from other areas, is the suggested Australasian Journal of Early Childhood.

To attract an international audience and international writers, it is important that the journal maintains its reputation as a high status publication in the early childhood arena. We are confident that our status within Australia is good and we want to ensure that, in an international context, we are also seen as a noteworthy publication. There is a difficulty in our sector in that there is a lack of an appropriate measure to determine journal quality on an international scale. This is a problem for academics who are required to demonstrate the ‘status’ of their publications through such a metric. For example, the SORTI study (see http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/sorti/) identified 907 education journals around the world that used some referring process, and less than 20% of these had an ISI citation ranking – the existing system used to identify journal ‘status’. AJEC does not have an ISI rating, but in the SORTI study AJEC was rated as the 23rd most valuable education journal used by Australian academics, and the most valuable in its area, early childhood. We need to continue to explore ways that we can attract higher ratings in order to attract high quality articles and increase the number of international authors who aspire to publish in our journal.

This issue of AJEC reflects these moves. We have an article by Dachs (from New Zealand) and Klopper addressing the issue of quality in relation to the New Zealand early childhood framework: Te Whāriki. Whilst Australian-based academics, early childhood practitioners and students may never work within the New Zealand framework, there is a lot we can learn from this article. Dachs and Klopper work from the concept of quality as holistic. They use music as an example of how we can work with children in a way that creates an overall experience that addresses multiple learning opportunities – not just developmental learning opportunities, but opportunities to address mental and physical health issues, cultural learning and emotional wellbeing.

Continuing on with the theme of cross-cultural understanding, Vuckovic explores relationship development when working across cultures. All practitioners will, at some time, work with children and families who come from different cultural backgrounds than their own. We need to be aware of the issues we face when doing so and be comfortable with the strategies we can use to ensure all children and families receive a high quality service. Goodfellow explores relationships further in her article on presence. Presence, she argues, is about both ‘being there’ and ‘being with’ children, and in a high quality program caregivers need to reflect on their ability to project presence in all its forms, and acknowledge the importance of the personal and emotional aspects of our work.

The growing focus on relationship development...
and maintenance reminds us that the world of early childhood practice is changing. We no longer value the practical, technical side of our practice over the interpersonal, as reminded by Goodfellow. Other aspects of our practice are changing also. Kilagallon, Maloney and Lock discuss how teachers in Western Australia coped with mandated educational change in their workplace, and how we can learn from their experiences to manage change more effectively. Nolan follows this idea with a paper explaining her experience working with undergraduate students, and using focus group discussions to help them manage the changes in their thinking associated with the learning in which they were engaged.

Zevenbergen and Logan remind us that we all have to continue to challenge ourselves to reflect on quality. They discuss the need to reframe how we think about computers and technology in early childhood. Humphrey and Crisp also challenge us to rethink our ideas of quality practice. In their article they discuss bullying in kindergartens and the need for us to think about how we address this concerning issue. Suthers continues the theme of change in her article on concerts, urging us to think about how we can deliver quality concerts for young children.

Finally, the article written by myself and my team (Sims, Saggars, Hutchins, Guilfoyle, Targowska & Jackiewicz) offers the ultimate challenge. We propose that a radical rethink is needed in the way early childhood services are delivered in Australia if we are to have any hope of addressing the growing incidence of disadvantage evident in our society. We review evidence from around the world, but also identify the knowledge and strengths already existing in Australia and put forward some ideas that we think could drive effective change.

AJEC is at the beginning of an effort to become more inclusive, to develop our reputation and status and move onto the world stage as a player worthy of respect. The articles we present to you this quarter will certainly support that move, and I hope that they trigger in you some ‘wow’ moments, and some ideas that prompt you to ponder on the work you do and how you go about doing it. Read and enjoy.

Margaret Sims
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The AJEC team
Meeting the goals of *Te Whāriki* through music in the early childhood curriculum

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to examine the strands and goals which arise from the four principles of ‘Empowerment; Holistic Development; Family and Community and Relationships’ (*Te Whāriki*, 1996) and to propose how music can be used in an integral way not only to meet the stated goals but also to promote them to their fullest potential. It also presents a challenge to early childhood educators to consider making greater intentional use of music appropriately and relevantly throughout their programs and their day-to-day activities. There is often the tendency to limit music to mat time or to sporadic rhythmic clapping or singing throughout the day without a conscious understanding of how these activities link to the strands and goals of *Te Whāriki*.

**Introduction**

FROM THE VERY FIRST gathering of human beings in groups, life has been celebrated, nurtured and revived through artistic expression. Throughout all ages dance, music, art, drama and a range of integrated art forms have provided the platform for the transmission of cultural and societal conventions. Through the exploration and study of these art forms we have been able to reconstruct and capture long-forgotten oral traditions and provide opportunities today for such traditions to be maintained.

In spite of the significant contribution the art forms offer cultures and society, the arts are frequently misunderstood, mis-communicated, or even undervalued. The current international trend for educational policies of countries to place more emphasis on the development of creativity, partly in acknowledgement that creativity is essential to economic competitiveness (Design Council, 2000; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Arts Council of England, 2000; Selzer & Bentley, 1999), necessitates a time for reflection on the bicultural national curriculum statement for the early childhood sector currently being advocated in New Zealand’s *Te Whāriki* (1996).

The five strands detailed in *Te Whāriki* (1996) provide numerous opportunities for music to be an integral part of achieving the goals and requirements of *Te Whāriki*. Carr (1998, in Wright, 2003, p.74), denotes that an authentic curriculum in the early childhood context gives attention to:

- the empowerment of children as active agents in their own learning
- the inclusion of the child’s worlds (family and community)
- a holistic approach to children’s growth and development
- recognition of the role of relationships in children’s early learning.

The recognition of children as musically competent in particular cultures provides a basis for empowering them to become active agents of their own musical learning (Wright, 2003). Children come to the early childhood setting with an inherited repertoire of songs, rhymes and games learned or mimicked from family, friends and siblings. They are naturally drawn to the act of making music, a process of participation in musical performance—singing, playing, dancing and listening (Small, 1998). Children also bring meaningful musical experiences from their diverse environments. The
work of Green (2005, p. 84) presents the dialectical relationship between musical meaning and experience. The representation is interpreted as inherent musical meaning responding in a positive or negative reaction/experience. Inherent musical meaning relates to the accepted music conventions utilised in musical discourse analysis. In inherent musical meaning, a positive response would result in a celebration leading to an understanding or excitement for further enquiry. If inherent musical meaning is perceived as negative or unvalued, the result is ambiguity or alienation—detachment, divorce, not wanting to participate. Ambiguity results in a misunderstood environment. The children’s musical repertoire and vocabulary not only reflects their inherent musical experiences and meanings but also reflects their experience as music makers. This rich experiential and meaningful musical basis provides a solid foundation from which educators as facilitators of learning can begin to unlock the child’s learning potential.

A holistic view of music for growth and development emphasises the links between music and other types of experience (Campbell, 1998), and recognises the role music plays in children’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Klopper, 2002). In the early childhood setting, provision should be made for children to explore the dialectic relationship between inherent musical meaning and musical experience, and educators should see these and similar encounters as forms of literacy.

A multiple literacies approach to curriculum requires the acknowledgement of all of society’s major forms of discourse, including music (Russell-Bowie, 2006). Children should be provided with opportunities to use the arts to depict and interpret, involving sensory, tactile, aesthetic, expressive and imaginative forms of understanding. Children learn artistic discourse through learning how to ‘read’ and ‘write’ using artistic symbols and by using visual, spatial, aural and bodily-kinaesthetic modes of thinking. This connection between body, thought, imagery, emotion, action and representation is, according to Wright (2003, p. 15), ‘what makes the arts a highly important component of young children’s education’. The development of children’s musical literacy, and their competence to participate, should be of leading importance to educators of early childhood.

Van der Linde (1999, pp. 2-5) outlines six reasons why the importance of music and movement activities should not be underestimated. Among these are four of particular relevance in meeting the goals of Te Whāriki through music in the early childhood curriculum:

- Mental capacity and intellect: There is a connection between music and the development of mathematical thinking. Music can lay the foundation for Piaget’s logico-mathematical reasoning since it provides ample opportunity for sequential and ordinal thinking (Piaget, 1950).

- Mastery of the physical self: Children develop coordination that aids muscular development. They begin to understand what they can do with their bodies as they run, balance, stretch, crawl and skip.

- Development of the affective aspect: Through music and movement children learn acceptable outlets to express feelings and relieve tension. Music may also convey a specific mood through which children reveal their feelings and emotions.

- Development of creativity: Music can create an imaginary world that stimulates a child’s creativity. A box can become a drum, a stick can be transformed into a horn, or a broom could become a dance partner. Children make up songs or give new words to old songs for pure enjoyment or to convey a message.

**Te Whāriki**

The following structure is obtained directly from Te Whāriki (1996). The five strands are identified and then proposals are made for the achievement of each strand through the use of music. The use of italics indicates direct quotation from Te Whāriki (1996).

**Strand 1: Wellbeing – Mana Atua**

The health and wellbeing of the child are protected and nurtured.

**Goals**

Children experience an environment where:

- **Their health is promoted**

Even in a very informal way, laying the foundations for good singing will include introducing children to correct breathing and posture. Simple posture and breathing exercises, games which include balance and moving in time to music and without music, will promote the coordination of breathing, singing, relaxation and focusing techniques.

Simple songs and chants can also be used to promote acquisition of specific academic and life skills such as good nutrition, information about food groups, personal hygiene and healthy habits.

- **Their emotional well-being is nurturing**

Since music can be used to release and express a range of emotions and feelings, music activities can be used successfully to promote emotional wellbeing. Group music-making activities using percussion instruments, and group movement and dancing to music, can also do much to encourage the shy child to become more
confident and outgoing as well as allowing the confident child to express feelings in a positive and nurturing environment.

Performing for each other as well as for parents and the school community can provideimulation and feelings of wellbeing. Music is fun and allows many possibilities for free expression individually and in a group, both of which encourage self-confidence. Dancing/moving, singing and playing musical instruments—especially in time to joyous music—lifts the spirits and promotes feelings of wellbeing. The interdependence and individual responsibility to a group endeavour also produces feelings of belonging, being needed and inclusiveness in a happy, non-threatening event (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Competitiveness, striving for musical accuracy or perfection beyond the children's capabilities and allowing the activity to become stressful will undermine this endeavour at young ages. It may be gradually encouraged as the child grows older.

- They are kept from harm

Becoming sound-sensitive will protect the young child from hearing impairments. It is not only important to control noise levels in the centre and to take every precaution to improve the overall acoustic level of the environment, but also equally important to deliberately draw children's attention to noise levels. A number of contemporary studies concerning noise in early childhood educational settings have established its detrimental effects on both children and educators (Maxwell & Evans, 1999; Nelson & Soli, 2000; Sorkin 2000). Most of these projects have focused on children, as they are more vulnerable than adults to long-term health, psychological and educational impairments created by classroom noise (Evans & Lepore, 1993; Evans & Maxwell, 1997; Nelson & Soli, 2000).

Games and other imaginative and creative ways of suddenly encouraging children to be very still and quiet (other than using disciplinary measures) teach children to celebrate silence and to become familiar with it so that they do not grow up 'fearing' or abhorring silence. The fact that exposure to excessively high noise levels over prolonged periods can be detrimental to hearing should also encourage greater control of the sonic environment. Since so many vital foundations are being laid at this stage, it also needs to be remembered that there can be a high correlation between prolonged exposure to high levels of sound and aggressive behaviour. Tension, tiredness, short-temperedness and lethargy are also common side-effects and outcomes resulting from careless attitudes towards exposure to sound. Learning to control one's environment is a life skill, and healthy habits begin at a young age.

One of the most serious outcomes of exposure to loud noises is a lack of sensitivity to sound and a 'shutting out’ of sound which the body may do as a natural protective mechanism. This can lead to the child failing to develop good listening skills, which will impede their learning. Further, lack of sensitivity to specific sounds may result in the child missing critical safety warnings and verbal cues.

Becoming sound-sensitive and developing an awareness of necessary or unnecessary sounds, both desirable or undesirable, and learning to discriminate between different and similar sounds, lays the foundation for good listening skills that are essential for effective learning. Mills (1996, p. 86) discusses the notion of ‘purposeful listening’—listening for specific features within the music. Campbell and Scott-Kassner (1995, p.159) refer to ‘active listening’ in contrast to ‘functional listening’, and illuminate interpretation as a form of listening that focuses on musical events in some ways. There are many entertaining ways to introduce children at an early stage to the fact that sound not only enters their bodies through their ears, but that their bodies have to deal with sounds, intentionally or unintentionally absorbed, much as they have to deal with food. The analogy with food is useful as it simultaneously assists children in developing an appreciation and understanding of the purpose and use of food as they learn to understand and respect sound/music.

Many children are eventually incorrectly ‘labelled’ as having learning difficulties when in fact they are unable to concentrate, focus their minds and retain information because of poor listening skills. Poor listening skills can cause inattentiveness, restlessness, being easily distracted and other behavioural issues. A poor sonic environment can compound the problem. There needs to be greater care to ensure that children are surrounded by sounds which intentionally stimulate their focused listening skills, while they are simultaneously protected from unnecessary sounds which simply distract them.

Wright (2003, p. 82) proffers a useful framework for thinking about the organisation of listening experiences in the early childhood setting:

- focus on formal properties
- focus on representational properties
- focus on expressive properties
- focus on contextual properties
- focus on technical properties.

Focusing on each of these aspects separately and in combination can ensure that a comprehensive listening program is developed.
Children need to learn to protect and nurture their health and wellbeing by actively engaging in musical activities. The activities should promote good health, stimulate emotional wellbeing and develop sonic safe practises.

Strand 2: Belonging – Mana Whenua

Goals

Children and their families feel a sense of belonging. Children and their families experience an environment where:

1. Connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended

Young children thrive in environments where they interact with adults. This is particularly true when the adults are attentive to the interests and expressions of the children. Positioning teachers so that episodes of ‘joint attention’ (pointing to objects, showing, following another person’s gaze, responding to invitations to social interaction) (Smith, 1999) are possible is important for a child’s growth and wellbeing. This includes emotional wellbeing and the successful acquisition of language. Smith (1999, p. 94) researched joint attention episodes in New Zealand early childhood centres and found that 35 per cent of the children in the study did not experience any joint attention episodes with caregivers. This should provide suitable motivation for the provision of musical experiences where children and their families can be honoured through cultural exchange, where families are invited to share recordings of music from their specific culture; perform songs and dances from their cultures; and encouraged to teach these songs and dances to the children, enabling cultural transference.

2. They know that they have a place

Group activities such as dancing and singing within a cultural context promote a sense of belonging. Sharing how families celebrate special events allows children to feel that they have a special place to belong. Should this not really be the case in their own lives, non-specific cultural experiences or simply making music together or singing or dancing will have the effect of encouraging the child to feel a sense of belonging, however temporary.

3. They feel comfortable with the routines, customs and regular events

Many musical activities require children to wait their turn, listen to each other, hold their instrument still until they have to play, and respond to changes in the music (play loudly or softly when required). Children learn mutual respect and ‘rules’ of participation, honouring each other and being tolerant, unselfish and understanding. All this can be encouraged by means of active involvement in music making, and by watching musical performances. For example, children can watch an orchestra perform and have their attention drawn to how the instruments are conventionally held and played, each instrument having its own special time to play and to rest. They can watch cultural dances and observe various conventions, such as what dancers do with their hands or which cultural groups join hands and which do not.

4. They know the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour

Much of what has already been suggested will encourage this basic understanding of boundaries and acceptable behaviour. The discipline required when practising a dance, song or a piece of percussion music to achieve an ‘acceptable’ level of performance encourages perseverance, persistence and acceptable behaviour within musical boundaries. We all sing on the same note; we all play together in time to the music; we all wait until the ‘conductor’ indicates the start and finish. Music is a highly social form of human practice. Musical works are multi-dimensional artistic-social constructions. These constructs are learned through constructive knowledge and optimal experience of musical works (Elliot, 1995). The opportunity to practise these constructs and to gain meaning helps children to learn to become:

… a participant in community dialogue, toward the ‘acquisition of shared meaning’ through the use of

Strand 3: Contribution – Mana Tangata

Goals

Opportunities for learning are equitable and each child’s contribution is valued.

Children experience an environment where:

- There are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity, or background.

Group activities in the arts transcend any other group experience in diversity of age and gender. They are more inclusive, and there is greater mutual responsibility and need to work together for the good of the whole group performance. Such pedagogical practices can be identified as collaborative learning, which has shown to be a more effective way of learning than individualised or competitive learning (Slavin, 1983; Johnson & Johnson, 1987). There is a robust research tradition addressing a myriad of issues involving collaborative learning (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2005). Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (2000) have suggested that there is no other pedagogical practice that simultaneously generates such diverse positive outcomes as collaborative learning. Everyone performs simultaneously, which is like a team game or sport. A team sport is an ‘orchestrated’ endeavour where everyone has a role to play so that the team as a whole reaches the goal. Working towards something outside of themselves teaches children true unselfishness and consideration.

When describing people’s cultural and ethnic milieu, it is important for adults to provide children with accurate terms to describe themselves and others. The use of non-biased language to describe social diversity to young children is an important aspect of implementing an anti-biased approach to teaching and learning. Since music is universally regarded as a custodian of cultural conventions, it is a highly suitable vehicle by which differing cultural and ethnic milieus can be explored and experienced.

- They are affirmed as individuals

Group work requires total commitment from each individual. Young children, like all people, need affirmation and a sense of belonging. Affirmation can be attained through the individual’s contribution to the group, and this establishes self-worth.

- They are encouraged to learn with and alongside others

The inter-dependence and the responsibilities inherent in group music-making and dance provide invaluable opportunities for working alongside others.

Familiar, interested adults from the community are particularly important for scaffolding children’s learning in collaborative group situations, as they can create a comfortable and supportive learning environment through experimental play and investigation (Centres for Curiosity and Imagination, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Weier, 2000). According to Yenawine (2003) people can overcome their own fears and limitations by sharing observations and insights with others:

A group of people brings a breadth of information and experience to the process, even if it is not experience with art. Importantly, the synergy of people adding to each other’s observations and bouncing ideas off one another enables a “group mind” to find possible meanings in unfamiliar images more productively than any individual alone could do. (p.12)

Strand 4: Communication – Mana Reo

Goals

- The language and symbols of their own and other cultures are promoted and protected

Historically, the arts are considered to be the custodians of the language and symbols of culture. Oral tradition utilises poems, songs and dance as a strong means of preserving culture and tradition. We know oral transmissions to be very effective. Along with the discipline of precise transmission, an oral system of education can encourage creativity through the development of forms of innovation and problem-solving (Mans, 2002).

Goals

Children experience an environment where:

- They develop non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes

In music sessions children learn to communicate using their voices in ways other than formal speech or vocalisation. They learn to use their bodies to express emotions, ideas and role play situations and events. Musical instruments provide opportunities for non-verbal communication such as:

- accompanying songs and recorded music
- creating original thematic pieces of music
- demonstrating and expressing understanding of musical concepts
- experimenting with various ways of playing instruments to achieve various effects
- applying their knowledge of musical concepts to their own creative expression
- developing coordination
- developing and enhancing reading skills.
They develop verbal communication skills for a range of purposes

Singing has been proved to assist children with speech difficulties, pronunciation and projection. Singing increases confidence in pronouncing words and acquiring new vocabulary, and provides non-threatening opportunities to openly express ideas, feelings and emotions. The correct breathing taught to produce good singing voices can help to remedy stuttering and other speech defects. Social customs and norms such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ can be taught through rhymes and chants. Listening to children’s comments and questions as they discuss their music activities is an important strategy in building children’s interest and sense of wonder in the world around them (McWilliams, 1999; Fleer & Cahill, 2001).

They experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures

Stories and symbols of their own and other cultures are all aptly captured in songs and dances. Organising a Ra Whakangahau and involving the whole Whanau allows for a meaningful bi-cultural experience. Maori and Pacific Island performing arts can be experienced in a way in which even young children can meaningfully participate. The movements of the Kapahaka, as well as the making and the twirling of the Poi, would allow children to discover and develop different ways to be creative and expressive. No Ra Whakangahau would be complete without arts and crafts and the weaving of flax, for example, to produce kete. Even the Mahi Kai—the preparing of food—can involve children and teach them the stories and symbols of their culture. Alongside these specific Maori examples, children from other cultures can also make contributions which would highlight the similarities and differences between Maori and Pacific Island cultures and other New Zealand cultures.

Making up stories related to culture can include Easter stories related to Easter eggs. For example, imaginative ideas about the role of the Easter Bunny within a secular context can be explored. Likewise, exploring ideas about the ‘new life’ symbolised with the egg can be explored within a spiritual context. Matariki, the Maori New Year, which occurs in June, can involve the children in the traditional practice of planting vegetables and trees as well as encouraging them to set goals for the New Year. Such cultural activities would always include experiences and stories passed down from generation to generation.

Music has been called the ‘universal language of mankind’. ‘Depending on the culture of their family and community, children will perpetuate and create their songs based upon familiar sounds’ (Campbell, 2007, p. 883). A number of theories have been derived from the scholarly study of children’s song and musical play across the disciplines. Minks (2002) classified them as reflecting paradigms that are: (a) diffusionist, where song is seen to represent a culture trait that can be traced to various geographic regions; (b) enculturative, in which children’s music is seen as part of adult culture; (c) autonomous, such that children’s music transcends locality and cultural background; (d) pertinent to cultural cognitivism, where song is viewed for its understanding of children’s learning processes and communicative patterns; and (e) illustrative of music/language acquisition, the realm of study that focuses on the incipient vocalised speech and musical utterances of infants and young children. Campbell (2007) claims that collections of singing games and song texts assert children’s poetic sensibilities, their playful interactions and social networks, and their links to their community.

Strand 5: Exploration – Mana Aoturoa

Goals

The child learns through active exploration of the environment.

Children experience an environment where:

- Their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised
- They gain confidence in and control of their bodies
- They learn strategies for active exploration, thinking and reasoning

Music can release inhibitions amongst the shy and provide an outlet for the excessively active and extroverted child, in such a way as to be spontaneous and informal while providing opportunities for intentional learning.

Playing instruments promotes coordination and control of the body, as does dancing. Body movements are regulated in time to the pulse and rhythm of the music, and to the melodic contour, tempo and dynamic variations. Singing too provides an opportunity for regulating breathing and controlling posture and stance. This helps develop self-expression and provides an avenue for the release of emotions. Discovering the body’s capability for movement heightens a child’s self-confidence and physical coordination, and develops connections between cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills.

Sounds are exciting and can provide a stimulus for exploration. Children should be encouraged to make simple instruments from a range of sound-producing objects. As they use their instruments to explore musical concepts, particularly timbre, children can try to relate the sounds of their instruments to those of pre-recorded sounds of traditional and commercial instruments, which encourages comparisons and associations of musical elements. Activities could include children deciding whether or not their instrument has a higher...
or lower pitch than that of another child’s in their group, or that of a traditional or commercially-produced Western instrument demonstrated by the teacher or played from a recording. Many creative ideas can be explored following a question such as, ‘What does the sound of this make you think of or remind you of?’

Identifying environmental sounds (seeds, wood, stones and dry leaves) as well as household sounds (doorbell, alarm clock, telephone and snoring) can prompt rational decision-making. Choices and decisions can be made to select appropriate sounds to support stories.

A game of voice recognition while blindfolded would assist in the development of sound-and-name association and lay the foundation of auditory discrimination. Children can experiment with all the different vocal sounds they can produce. Similarly, they can be encouraged to use their bodies to create a range of sounds.

A selection of homemade and commercially-produced instruments can be used to help children discover how different sounds can be produced and how to group similar sounds according to pitch, timbre and so on. Traditional Maori instruments may not be readily available, but pictures and recordings will assist the children in exploring music within an appropriate cultural context.

Melodic recognition through humming a familiar tune, playing a tune on a melodic instrument, or listening to recorded music offers the opportunity for young children to recognise familiar tunes. Their mental faculties are stimulated as they recognise repeated passages, sequences and patterns in the music.

They develop working theories for making sense of the natural, social, physical and material worlds

The exploration of sounds provides a direct connection with the natural, physical and material environment. It is important that a very strong foundation is laid for children to learn to be ‘sound aware’ in order to appreciate the potential for sound and its negative and positive effects. Allowing children to associate music with emotions from an early age can teach them that excessively loud sounds can not only damage their hearing but also make them feel restless, possibly aggressive, and even scared. Likewise, encouraging children to select music for calm activities such as painting or for rest periods will teach them to consider the appropriate use of music.

Children can be encouraged to recognise sounds in nature, such as bird and animal calls, the wind and the rain. Careful listening can help children to recreate such sounds as closely as possible – using their voices, bodies and sound-producing objects.

Learning about sounds in nature will enable children to be sensitive to these sounds and to react appropriately to them. Similarly, exposing young children to the sounds that surround them daily helps them to recognise the meaning or message in the sound. This process can start with the familiar sound of the school bell or the teacher’s voice, and then move to more distant yet important sounds such as the police car siren or smoke alarm. Sensitising children to the sounds in their environment will ensure the early development of good listeners and not just a community that hears.

Music plays an integral part of any society’s structure, and as such allows children an avenue for understanding social norms and practices in a non-threatening and fun manner.

Conclusion

The many benefits music holds for development of young children—intellectually, physically and emotionally—cannot be underestimated. Integrating music meaningfully, not only to meet the stated goals of Te Whāriki but also to promote them to their fullest potential is indeed a worthwhile aim. It is also a challenge to early childhood educators to be more determined to make greater use of music, appropriately and relevantly throughout their programs and their day-to-day activities in their teaching centres.

References


Making the multicultural learning environment flourish
The importance of the child–teacher relationship in educating young children about diversity

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IN AUSTRALIA MULTICULTURALISM and diversity are part of daily experience. In such a society, children grow up with diverse norms, traditions and role models and are expected to become open-minded and tolerant individuals. A key figure in children’s lives will often be the teacher, one of the first significant role models they interact with outside the family. The special character of these dyadic relationships and the challenges faced by the teacher have not been emphasised sufficiently in the literature. Successfully catering for a multicultural group of young children requires reflection and understanding of one’s own culture, as well as a sound knowledge of the children and their culture. This paper reviews the various factors teachers need to be mindful of when educating young children, and concludes by presenting a model illustrating how relationships work in the early childhood education setting.

The child–teacher relationship

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG children to experience ambiguity when trying to conceptualise the idea of ethnic and cultural diversity. It is not uncommon that children’s images of ethnicity do not correspond to reality. Thus, they may need to seek support and guidance from family, friends and educators. Children’s attempts to understand the social world must be respected, and adults working with children should be ready to provide them with opportunities to explore and understand a diverse range of social contexts. Teachers who deliver culturally-responsive education are aware that it is hard work. It requires knowledge of children and families, their roots, language patterns, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits and customs. It also requires a high degree of self-awareness of one’s own cultural background and personal idiosyncrasies. Providing culturally-responsive education means acknowledgement that sometimes diversity brings dissonance, and this is a reason for the teacher to create programs that reflect cultural diversity, on an immediate and more general level.

This paper presents arguments supporting the call for multicultural education in the early childhood setting and the community. It discusses the importance of the child-teacher relationship in the education process. Attention is also paid to what children are developmentally capable of understanding and reflecting upon, and how the values they bring to early childhood settings can affect learning and social behaviour. The teacher’s responsibilities are described, particularly the multiple levels of awareness in accordance with the model developed by Vuckovic as outlined in Figure 1 (Vuckovic, 2005). This model has been adopted in a modified form by the author and is a tool that can be utilised by teachers and children alike to instruct and learn about the different factors relevant to multicultural education.

Defining recurrent terms

With regard to ethnicity, two main concepts are introduced and used recurrently in this text. These are ethnic-identity and ethnic-group. ‘Ethnicity’ itself is a broad term referring to a sense of commonality that can be derived from a shared historical past, common experiences, religious affiliation and a common linguistic heritage, as well as shared values, attitudes, perceptions, mores and folkways (King, 1980). ‘Ethnic identity’ is the subjective self-categorisation of an individual into a particular ethnic group (King, 1980). Importantly, individuals’ perceptions of their ethnicity might change. They may not perceive themselves as ethnic, while others may see them as part of an ethnic group whether they wish to be associated with that group or not. In principle, the individual may choose among ethnic preferences if different ethnic affiliations are possible. An
‘ethnic group’ shares a common ancestry and history, and may speak a language other than the official one for their country of residence (Sheets & Hollins, 1999). An ethnic group may also practise culture-specific customs and traditions that reflect ancestry.

As Cullican (1998) highlights, multicultural education means moving beyond race and ethnicity and taking into account elements that interconnect with race and ethnicity, such as gender, class, age, religious background and group affiliations. Each of these elements represents a cultural classification. The differences in groups, on the basis of these elements, deserve the same consideration as differences based on ethnicity. The purpose of the next section is to acknowledge that a broader meaning can be assigned to the term culture, as opposed to ethnicity or racial diversity.

Why teach ethnic awareness to young children?

All educational settings in Australia are called upon to implement multicultural education policies that have been legislated by state and national governments. This is a necessary step as 43 per cent of Australians were born overseas and about 200 languages are spoken (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2007). Just about every community in Australia is pluralistic and thus embodies the heritage, customs and languages of many ethnic groups. If pluralism and the preservation of cultural and ethnic identity are considered desirable by society, then learning environments should reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the population. As King (1980) argues, the pluralistic nature of the local community surrounding preschools and schools greatly facilitates multi-ethnic education. Therefore, many Australian communities have a structural advantage in that they make use of resources from within the community.

The structure of pluralistic societies affords multicultural education and also has advantages for highly homogenous societies. This is because ethnically homogeneous societies still exhibit marked diversity in terms of social class, language, sexual orientation and other human and social differences. Learning to respect diversity thus incurs benefits for everyone in the society. Another advantage, as Nieto (2004) points out, is that multicultural education is an effective approach in preparing children for the challenges of a globalising world where there is an increased level of interdependence between nations and cultural groups.

Teaching of concepts from within the pool of ideas of multicultural education is helpful in itself. Knowledge about the concept of ethnic identity, for instance, can help children to gain a more accurate understanding of why an individual might interpret social reality in diverse ways according to their specific context. Multicultural education is successful when it leads to the genuine acceptance of one’s own and others’ ethnicity. Studies have found that this acceptance relates positively to psychological wellbeing, interpersonal relations competence, the development of social consciousness, and personal efficacy (Fountain, 1990). The acceptance of ethnic similarities and differences has been associated with the formation of positive inter-group relations which, in turn, bring forth intense cross-cultural exchange. Over time, exchange may lead to enhanced inter-cultural competence. The absence of exchange, on the other hand, has been associated with inter-group tensions, mistrust and higher receptivity for tendencies to stereotype (King, 1980; Glover, 1994; Mundine & Guigni, 2006). Abstract aspects of multiculturalism may be difficult to convey because of the children’s developmental cognitive stages or because counter-conditioning of attitudes occurs in their various social surroundings.

Children

Developmental features

Primary socialisation—the internalisation or adoption of values and attitudes, as well as preferences and habit patterns in the early years of life—leaves a sustaining impact on the individual (Aboud, 1988; Glover, 1994; McInerney & McInerney, 2006). Children as young as two and three years are aware of human differences and this awareness is associated with the development of particular attitudes (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001). These findings highlight how important it is for society to bring social values and attitudes to children’s attention during this critical developmental period. Multicultural awareness and tolerance will prepare young children for a tolerant and harmonious world. In support of this argument is the finding that children, once they become aware of differences, begin to construct classifications in an attempt to make sense of their observations (Aboud, 2003). While the controversy about young children’s ability to form permanent judgemental attitudes towards groups is still unresolved (Aboud, 2003; Nesdale, 2001; York, 1991), observations that preschool children do classify people on the basis of perceptual cues and evaluate all members of this group indiscriminately (Dermer-Sparks & Higa, 1989; Kowalski & Lo, 2001) are strongly indicative of children’s cognitive ability to use broad classifications when forming their world view. However, children’s representation of cultural and racial attitudes is still a simplified form of the complex concepts used by adults. Children’s prejudices are founded on a simple dichotomy of positive versus negative feelings (Aboud, 2003). To arrive at a mature notion of racial attitudes and stereotypes is a gradual and long-term process (Targowska, 2001).

Research examining young children’s understanding of broader concepts of ‘culture’, and the development of attitudes to cultures other than their own, is sparse.
Culture, unlike race, provides fewer perceptual cues that children can use for the purpose of group categorisation. Ramsey (1987) argues that young children are unable to form cultural categories, such as national identity, and encounter difficulties in understanding the existence of their own culture. At eight or nine years of age children are able to make links between specific behaviours and particular cultures. Interestingly, though, young children do notice manifestations of culture such as language, music and food. Other cultural artefacts, for instance attitudes to age and gender, are likely to have an incidental influence. Observing when a child is engaging in experiences that have the potential to form cultural or ethnic attitudes is also challenging. Older children are more likely to voice their attitudes openly, while younger children might not express their growing awareness.

The literature reviewed so far indicates that children as young as three years are able to form value attached categories of people, as long as distinctive perceptual cues are available to guide their selection. More abstract forms of grouping, which require the interpretation of behaviour in context, are used only in later years of childhood. The social sources from which children gather information to evaluate groups are discussed in the next section.

Social relationships

Children's readiness to use race or ethnicity as a category depends on their previous social contact with members of various ethnic groups, the nature of the distinction (perceptual vs. behavioural vs. evaluative) that is suggested to them, and the social situation that affords or requires categorisation (Ramsey, 1987). While most children form perceptual categories on their own, linking perceptual cues to behavioural ones and forming a judgement is often influenced by children's social relationships. Of course, attitudes may also be formed on the basis of personal experience and can then be generalised (this is most likely on a first encounter with a clearly discriminable member of a different group), but they often arise even with little or no contact and predominantly on the basis of hearsay.

According to Bee (2000), young children's experiences of relationships can be categorised as vertical or horizontal in nature. Vertical relationships refer mainly to interaction with people with potentially greater social influence on the child with regard to power and knowledge. This group includes parents, teachers and other adults. Horizontal relationships, on the other hand, refer to personal friendships—relationships with peers or other children around the same age. Individuals higher on the vertical dimension exert the strongest influence, through authority and because children have a fundamental trust in the honesty and omniscience of adults (Bruck & Ceci, 1999). Individuals on the horizontal axis that is on the same level as the subject do not exert influence by authority but rather by mutual trust. For young children, horizontal influence is usually weaker as there is scepticism about the competence and authority of a horizontal ‘informer’. With increasing age (10 years and over) the disparity between axes diminishes (and often reverses during puberty). Multicultural education aims to produce effects on both axes. According to Bee's model, strong influence from the teacher is exerted on the children. Once children adopt the attitudes that are suggested to them and role-modelled in the learning environment, they influence each other reciprocally.

Moral understanding

The level of moral reasoning young children are capable of is another point of interest. According to Kohlberg's (1981) six stages of moral reasoning, early childhood is marked by a preconventional sense of morality (Level 1). Without guidance, young children are thought to be unable to detect and appreciate differences between themselves and others, which concurs with Ramsey's analysis of children's appreciation of culture. They are obedient to authorities and make judgements about the rightness of an action according to the consequences it entails. Initially children seem to learn certain codes of moral behaviour, or what are good and bad actions, from the guidelines set by parents, early childhood educators and other authorities (the doctor, for example). After the first few years, however, they utilise these basic moral guidelines as a frame of reference for developing their own sense of morality and determining personal resolutions and choices. The nature of moral understanding is a crucial determinant of the success probability of multicultural education, as morality in the form of respect and trust plays a central role in the approach. Using the right techniques for the child's level of moral reasoning increases the effectiveness of the educational efforts. While the argument so far has been concerned with child developmental features considered to be to some extent universal, the purpose of the following section is to show the immense variety brought about by cultural differences. One can be sure that both the development of morality and the strength of horizontal vs. vertical social influence are mediated by culture.

Cross-cultural differences

Stages of child development and the manner considered appropriate for raising children are functions of the cultural belief system (Mclnerny & Mclnerney, 2006). The Western taxonomy of biological stages, for example, is markedly different from Indigenous or Eastern ways. For older children, these include ideas about when the child is capable of adult behaviour and the degree to which behaviour of children should be controlled by adults (Sheets & Hollins, 1999). For younger children, even toilet training reflects significant differences amongst ethnic and cultural groups.

In approaching puberty, some ethnic groups, such as the Navajo Indians in the United States, expect 9-15 year-
olds to act like adults and to make their own decisions (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1999), while in the Anglo-American culture individuals of the same age are still considered children too immature to make their own decisions. Children who engage in socially unacceptable behaviour in one context may be confronted with conflicting behavioural expectations across contexts; for example, spillover between preschool and the home may cause confusion if practices and relationships are different. Coming into conflict with 'cultural boundaries' (Erickson, 1987, p. 345) is a good indicator that children experience different cultural standards in terms of developmental appropriateness.

Even the same ethnic groups can be characterised by great diversity; for instance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Some Aboriginal groups live very traditional lifestyles in isolated communities; some live semi-traditional lifestyles on the outskirts of country towns; and some participate fully in urban life within city communities. Furthermore, there is a great diversity of opinion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island groups as to what constitutes relevant and appropriate education for their children. This example illustrates that ethnic groups are fragmented into smaller cultural units and it is a rare event that one form of education is culturally relevant and appropriate to all (McInerney & McInerney, 2006).

The smallest cultural unit, and the one which has the strongest influence on the child, is arguably the family. It is responsible for the child's physical needs and transmits values, beliefs and attitudes which are fundamental for both moral and emotional growth. It is the family that forms the child's ethnic identity and regulates social behaviour. Many children, after finishing their preschool day and re-entering their family or ethnic circle, are expected by their family to resume life in particular patterns and traditions, sometimes even a different language for the rest of the day and night. This represents one important aspect of the social construction of ethnic identity. An extreme case of ethnic identity formation is when children grow up in ethnic ghettos. They often start believing that their ethnicity is reflective of mankind as a whole (Broinowski, 1994) and will therefore have potential difficulties when experiencing their first cross-cultural encounter.

Multicultural education approaches need to be conscious of children's multiple ethnic identities and the cultural patterns which govern their life outside preschool. A successful approach will further take regard of the children's developmental stages and recognise their capability to understand multiculturalism. Children, however, and the variables that affect them are only one part of the dyadic relationship in the learning environment. The role and nature of the teacher is just as important and will be explored next.

**The teacher**

Teaching is a holistic activity not easily separated into clearly distinguishable components. Teachers' work over the past two decades has changed, becoming more complex because of changes in the characteristics of the child population, in particular dramatically increased ethnic and language diversity (McInerney & McInerney, 2006) and the integration of children with different abilities. While teachers are cross-culturally perceived as role models, their status and authority differs according to the cultural environment. Identifying what is expected of them by different cultural groups is the principle challenge teachers face, as the following sections will illustrate.

**Self-reflection**

Identifying one's cultural roots might involve reflecting on how one was socialised as a child, what values and customs were internalised and continue to be followed as the result of personal and group affiliations. Successful cultural self-assessment enables the teacher to recognise commonalities with and differences from children and their families, which is a necessary condition for trust and respect on both sides (Coelho, 1998). If teachers accept and feel comfortable with their ethnicity they may be well-placed to respond positively to individuals who belong to other ethnic groups. A strong personal sense of cultural identity enables the teacher to value, respect and relate to children and families from diverse backgrounds.

One of the aims of multicultural education is to increase children's inter-cultural competence. In order to achieve this, teachers themselves need to develop competence. As a first step, teachers must be equipped with a sense of their own ethnic and personal identity, but, ideally, they should also develop a positive acceptance of their various group affiliations. Teachers should recognise their unique likes and dislikes (also in respect of culture and ethnicity). While such a degree of self-awareness is desirable for all teachers, it is indispensable if the learning environment is intended to be culturally sensitive (King, 1980; Mundine, 2006).

Self-reflective activity is a lifelong and dynamic process (Vuckovic, 2005). Ethnicity changes with the passage of time, geographic location, upward or downward social mobility, and business and social contacts. For example, when visiting another country, one's ethnicity may dominate all other identities. How well self-reflection is accomplished will vary, as people differ in the degree to which they recognise their own ethnic identity and their awareness of how ethnicity affects their day-to-day life. This is often overlooked, resulting in a discrepancy between one's perceived self and one's actual self (Singer, 1987).

Aside from knowing 'what they are', teachers should also be cognisant of 'how they are' (Sheets & Hollins, 1999). 'How', in this case, refers to attitudes towards racial, ethnic and cultural matters and how these attitudes might
be reflected in program content, the educational approach used, or the aim of a planned experience. The ‘how’ is important, as the climate of the learning environment is intrinsically related to the teacher’s attitudes towards cultural diversity.

Understanding children and families

Teacher self-awareness certainly is critical to the identification and appreciation of diversity. A refined and attuned handling of multiculturalism, however, becomes possible only when teachers accumulate knowledge and understanding of the ethnic and cultural groups they are interacting with. To this end, teachers need to be willing to learn from ethnic groups and stay open-minded while at the same time being ready to critically reflect upon experiences and conflicts. If a teacher is to make the best use of the pluralism of the surrounding community, it is important to investigate the people and the resources that might contribute to the preschool’s programs.

Exploring the various cultural backgrounds of the working environment has to be a decidedly objective and practical study of the racial and ethnic elements in the community from which the preschool population is recruited (King, 1980; Mundine & Guigni, 2006). Objectivity, while hardly completely realisable, can only be approximated when confounds such as teachers’ own attitudes and values are successfully monitored by the teacher.

Differences uncovered among ethnic groups in the study of racial and ethnic elements can and should be acknowledged and respected. Moreover, teachers should understand and express differences as desirable and assign them positive rather than neutral valency. An educational argument in favour of celebrating difference is the link between ethnic identity and self-esteem. Valuing the ethnic and cultural uniqueness of a child will foster self-esteem and pride in their ethnic identity. The openly expressed and displayed appreciation of diversity by the teacher also serves as a role-model for children to interact with others they perceive to be different from them.

Challenges to face

No matter how devoted and conscientious a teacher may be in presenting experiences that take into consideration diversity and promote it, at some stage cultural, racial or ethnic conflicts will most likely emerge in young children’s interactions. While the source of conflict must be identified on a case-to-case basis, a number of factors have been attributed to fuelling tension and undermining diversity in education. Tension amongst children may partly stem from some children coming to preschool with negative attitudes and misconceptions of different racial and ethnic groups (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1996). The use of teaching materials that include content about different racial and ethnic groups helps children develop more positive inter-group attitudes. The effect is further enhanced if multi-ethnic materials are organised in a consistent and sequential way over a long period (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1996). However, racial attitude expansion might not be favoured by all families (Sheets & Hollins, 1999). Family resistance is seldom openly displayed but has a subversive effect through socialisation at home. Teachers should carefully construct projects that involve families from multiple ethnic and racial groups in order to establish positive relationships. The teacher’s role in such projects is to be the facilitator, and involves acknowledging differences among families which need to be talked about when necessary. The teacher must emphasise that differences should be respected and treated as desirable, rather than merely being tolerated. Creating bonds between families is by no means easy, and it should be planned as a long-term goal.

While family and cultural background is one potential source of tension, two integral and interrelated parts of the human psyche also contribute to the atmosphere and behaviour encountered in the learning environment. These two parts are emotions and personality. Alone or in combination they give rise to habituated behaviour, which in itself can become an origin of conflict. Lasker (1968), for example, associates the presence of fear and ridicule with tension and conflict over race differences, and identified these factors’ contribution to behaviour. While fear is a universal human emotion (Izard, Kagan, & Zajonc, 1984), ridicule is a form of behaviour which might be mediated by both personality and emotional experience.

Emotions: Fear

Lasker (1968) argues that the development of race-awareness in small children always incurs an emotional response to members of other races. Commonly the emotion is fear. Not surprisingly, considering the extensive research on the sustainability of emotional impressions (Izard et al., 1984; Sorin, 2003), this component is also the most vivid and the most lasting of the reactions experienced. It means that some children do not start out with a neutral but rather a negative attitude when coming into contact with other races, which further emphasises the teacher’s obligation to build trust and understanding between ethnic groups as early as possible. I experienced the problem and the process of change first-hand:

A child in my kindergarten, Agung, had just arrived from Indonesia. He initially did not like to come to kinder as he was scared of the white teacher with the pointy nose. After observing that his parents formed a friendly relationship with me he became less distressed and eventually a good friend of mine. (12.02. 2004)

Race-related fear in young children seems to be associated with two elements. First, the racial group that inspires it must be sufficiently distinct to give the child an exaggerated impression of physical difference. Second, the fear is usually strongly presented in the adult environment. This second point is closely connected to the concept of negative stereotypes and prejudice.
Ethnic and other forms of prejudice are usually learned by the individual rather than being innate. The formation of prejudices often depends upon contact with the prevailing attitude of the group the individual belongs to (Sheets & Hollins, 1999). The resulting racial attitudes are not one-dimensional constructs. They are also not universal, but rather context-dependent. Therefore, teachers should be careful not to assume that the attitudes children express at preschool are reflective of their conviction in a different context. Rather, they should be aware that the social roles which are adopted and the rules followed by children change according to their perception of the situation. Preschools are an environment which provides limited opportunities for racial attitudes to be expressed, which may result in a suppression of discussion and the active exploration of stereotypes. Thus, children who are exposed to racial or cultural stereotypes only in their community or at home might be more likely to adopt racial attitudes, even more so when the stereotypes are put forward by individuals who rank higher than themselves in their social relationships.

Behaviour: Ridicule

While ridicule is a common form of human behaviour in children as much as in adults, it is not conceptually linked to ethnic or cultural diversity. The frequent use of racial nicknames by adults, for example ‘wog’, before children are aware what they mean or against what group they are directed, can lead to the adoption of stereotypical attitudes and imitation of culturally-intolerant behaviour. Ridicule is a strong weapon for strengthening one’s sense of superiority, particularly when those of another race or nationality are known to be ashamed of their descent. While children might not be aware of these subtleties, they soon discover that ridicule works best when it hits a weak spot. Although children from various ethnic backgrounds might be able to counter taunts on issues of their personality, their lack of understanding of ethnic difference and the tension associated with it in the adult world leaves them unprotected to race-based ridicule.

The teacher’s attitude

A third source of hindrance to successful multicultural education is associated with the teacher. As mentioned before, teachers must acquire knowledge about the cultures they come in contact with and develop respect for other views of the world. An example of where cultural conventions may differ significantly is communication style. Teachers who rely exclusively on verbal communication can hardly support a child who is unfamiliar with the syntax and vocabulary of the language used. Clearly, then, there is an incentive for teachers to learn about other cultures in order to identify sources of misunderstandings in child-adult interactions.

A different problem is some teachers’ lack of understanding of the principles of multicultural education. As Banks and McGee-Banks (1996) note, many teachers hold the assumption that the term ‘multicultural education’ is exclusively related to content addressing ethnic, racial and cultural issues. With this mind-set, maths and science teachers, for instance, cannot easily see how their content is related to cultural issues. For these teachers, arriving at an equity pedagogy (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1996, p. 392), which facilitates the academic achievement of children from diverse racial, cultural, gender and social class-groups, might mean looking for alternative teaching methodologies, monitoring the use of language, and evaluating the appropriateness of resources. Concretely, they may invite family members from a different country and let them present another way of exploring numbers. The book How Chinese learn mathematics: Perspectives from insiders (Lianghuo, 2004) clearly demonstrates multiple ways of approaching content as seemingly objective as maths.

Approaches to education and culture, and a child and teacher centred model

Glover (1994) reports that ‘addressing cultural diversity has given rise to a proliferation of programs and services’ (p. 81). There are now several educational theories which offer guidance for teachers to learn cultural/ethnic awareness, and to translate this knowledge into meaningful lessons or curricula. They share the common aim of leading to culturally diverse education, but are distinct in their underlying assumption and suggested practices.

In general, these theories also share at least one of the following features: addressing the needs of bi-cultural children; the need to develop positive attitudes and challenge the negative attitudes of majority group children; and the needs of all children to relate comfortably in a culturally diverse society. Theoretical approaches include the Bi-lingual approach (Catholic Education Office, 1988; Schwalm, 1998), Global education (Fountain, 1990; Pike & Selby, 1988), Multicultural Education – the inclusive approach (Coelho, 1998; Sinclair & Wilson, 1999), and the Constructionist theory of learning and teaching (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; McInerney & McInerney, 2006; Windschitl, 2002). All four feature similar pragmatic guidance to teachers, and assist in overcoming the gap between theory and practice in education. They all represent a different but significant response to cultural diversity.

Although the above-mentioned theories give general guidance to multicultural education, teachers in everyday situations may still be overwhelmed by the number of contextual factors to be considered. An extension of a model by Vuckovic (2005, Figure 1) might help to organise an effective learning environment.

The metaphor of a flower was chosen to illustrate that the teacher-child relationship is something organic and thus dynamic, that it is developing and also fragile. The twin-flower symbolises the dyadic relationship between teacher
and child, and thereby rejects a purely child-centred approach. Both of them are of equal importance and share some elements of the process. Other factors are particular to their role and experience. They are connected, for example, by a shared (learning environment) culture within the framework of the educational process in and outside of the learning environment. They are separated, on the other hand, by external influences. Teachers are directly affected by government legislation and policies, while children are influenced by families and peers, and both groups by their communities. Stereotypes can arise for both and the impact may vary in strength. The elements affecting the individual (the flower leaves) are context-specific and Figure 1 presents only an example of how they might be filled in. Utilising a blank version of this model, teachers can map out what affects them and this mapping can aid their self-reflection. They can further identify factors relevant to children and identify when, where and how children can best be assisted. For the children, the model might be an illustrative and memorable way to gain an awareness of what factors might be affecting their social development. The children themselves can participate in identifying important influences in their lives with verbal labels, photographs and drawings. They might further understand the role of the teacher as a person closely connected to them, which might help to build trust.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the value of multicultural education, examined possible practical difficulties, focused attention on the role of both the teacher and the child, and made some practical recommendations in relation to the model of how a participatory multicultural learning environment might be developed. The model was presented as a practical tool for teachers and children in their particular context.

It is my opinion that multicultural education is a worthwhile undertaking. Not only does it prepare children for the challenges of the globalised world but it also teaches tolerance and respect for others, which is the foundation of a peaceful and harmonious society. Children come to an educational setting with a set of cognitive abilities, a certain stage of moral understanding, a particular structure of social relations, and a specific cultural profile. Knowledge of all these factors can help to optimally facilitate children’s understanding of diversity and encourage them to develop a positive attitude towards it. Teachers, on the other hand, come into the learning environment with their own set of convictions and cultural constraints. For them it is important to obtain a high degree of self-awareness, while at the same time come to an understanding of the cultures prevalent in the community they are working with. Children and teachers’ perspectives have been dealt with separately and then drawn together with the suggested collaborative model. This approach was utilised to explore what each could potentially bring to the relationship. Such a discourse is an essential beginning if the child-teacher relationship is to be more than rhetoric, and facilitate diversity and strengthen the multicultural learning environment. While there has been a shift to more positive ideals in governmental policies, in practice there is an anomaly between what the stated objectives are, what teachers believe, and what is actual practice within many educational settings. Inspiring
and well-conceptualised educational theories (Fountain, 1990; McInerny & McInerny, 2006; Sinclair & Wilson, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) offer practical guidance, but, sadly, for many teachers education for cultural diversity is conducted without a sense of ownership and with the limited resources they may have at their disposal.

While it might not yet be reality, the development of meaningful educational programs can readily incorporate cultural commonalities and diversity, which is worthwhile as it expands the child’s horizon while at the same time increasing the teacher’s knowledge of using culture as an education tool.

References


Presence as a dimension of early childhood professional practice

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THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE phenomenon of presence and argues that it is a concept worthy of further investigation as a characteristic of adult-child interaction and a key component of quality care. Presence is situated within caring relationships and has a strong affective component that encompasses the heart and soul of professional practice. While cognitive (knowing) and social (engaging with) aspects of early childhood professional practice are important, presence has the potential to significantly impact on children's early emotional wellbeing. A suggested approach to furthering an appreciation of caring presence is to use digital video analysis software as a research tool in practitioner inquiry.

PRESENCE HAS RECEIVED considerable attention in the nursing literature with respect to the phenomenon of caring (Fredriksson, 1999; Nelms, 1996) and, more recently, in relation to teaching (for example, Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). However, presence has received little attention in the early childhood literature (Colley, 2006). This is curious because of the importance of ‘relationships’ in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments (see, for example, the NSW Curriculum Framework, 2002).

ECEC practitioners who work with children and families are required to have specific professional knowledge and skills to effectively engage with young children and promote their learning. However, while the quality of adult/child interactions is reported to be a key component of quality care (Mahoney & Hayes, 2006; Munton, Mooney, Moss, Clark & Woolner, 2002) the nature of these interactions beyond ‘warmth’ and ‘responsiveness’ is not clearly defined (Sylva, Sammons, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). If not defined then it is difficult to assess this characteristic of quality, to implement staff development opportunities that would enhance practitioners’ capacity to be responsive and to create relevant standards of practice. Furthermore, limiting the conceptualisation of quality in early childhood professional practice to qualifications and experience, while at the same time excluding individual attributes and competencies, potentially ignores the complexity of early childhood practitioners’ work. Furthermore, in their analysis of seven internationally recognised studies focusing on the relationships between children’s childcare experiences, teachers’ education/training and classroom quality, Early et al. (2007) concluded that teacher preparation programs may undervalue the importance of developing trusting, respectful relationships with children.

The Macquarie Dictionary (2001) describes a professional as one who ‘engage(s) in the practice of the profession’. In this article I use the words ‘professional’ and ‘practitioner’ interchangeably, with practitioner generally referring to those engaged in daily practices with children. This view reflects thinking within the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children’s Services (2002) which emphasises the importance of relationships in early childhood professional practices. In this context, the relationships underpinning practitioners’ work are limited by the roles and responsibilities of the profession.

Practice encompasses the often tacit dimensions of knowing, being, experiencing and acting. These
dimensions are embodied within the emotional sensitivity required by ECEC practitioners in their caring role where mind, body and emotion form part of being a professional (Manning-Morton, 2006). Embodied knowledge reflects the heart and soul of professional practice. It also encompasses emotional responses to life experiences that occur within socio-cultural contexts (Leitch, 2006).

Elsewhere I have argued in support of practitioners’ practical wisdom in professional practice by drawing attention to the ways in which practitioners make decisions (Goodfellow, 2001). Practical wisdom is about how the mind acts in cognitive ways. However, research has also demonstrated that the quality of practitioners’ emotional sensitivity (as embodied knowledge) is key to making a difference to children’s experiences of child care (Canadian Centre for Knowledge Mobilisation, 2006). Typically, this is referred to as warmth or responsiveness. However, such actions largely reflect a one-way process whereby the adult is an emotional giver rather than a receiver and responder to the child’s initiations and emotional states.

In this article I explore the phenomenon of presence as a concept worthy of further investigation within the context of ECEC practitioners’ work. In doing so, I consider the phenomenon of ‘caring presence’ (Nelms, 1996, p. 368) by first discussing its nature in respect of achieving high-quality child care environments. I then discuss the emotional nature of ECEC practitioners’ work and how a sense of presence is situated within caring relationships. Following this, I highlight contrasting views of ECEC practitioners and consider how these views, along with external requirements and accountabilities, impact on our understanding of relationships. Finally, I reflect on possibilities for furthering our understanding of caring presence in the context of early childhood professional practices.

The nature of caring presence

Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) define the embodied nature of presence as:

A state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step. (p. 265)

The Latin derivation of presence is praesens, meaning ‘present’ or ‘beside’. Metaphorically, this can mean ‘walking beside’ or ‘in tune with’, hence the notion of attunedness. Caring presence has two parts – ‘being there’ and ‘being with’. At the surface level, presence can be seen as physically being in a space. One has to be physically present in order to establish rapport and communicate with empathy. ‘Being there’ means that one actively makes eye contact, displays appropriate body language and cues in to active listening processes.

Presence is an existential state of ‘being with children’ (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003, p. 705). In a qualitative study undertaken by the author, ECEC practitioners who were ‘in tune’ with children vicariously spoke about ‘getting inside’, ‘tapping into’, ‘joining in with’, ‘gaining a perspective from the inside’, ‘being actively involved’ and ‘placing all of one’s concentration on the child’. One practitioner explained: ‘You need to be a part of the children’s experience and read the child rather than simply someone feeding knowledge to the children’ (Goodfellow, 1995).

Presence provides the key to how children in child care experience their day in safe and nurturing environments (Layzer & Goodson, 2006). Presence is situated within pedagogical rather than agogical perspectives of teaching and learning (Van Manen, 1991, pp. 11 & 31). It is oriented towards the nature of the professional–child relationship and the child’s experience rather than focusing on techniques and strategies. Presence is evident in the integrated professional work undertaken by pedagogues within the Reggio Emilia schools. As Moss (2006) suggests, pedagogues who focus on the ‘whole child’ recognise ‘the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity’ (p. 32). Within this context, learning, care and upbringing are integrated and ‘teaching’ is viewed as a collaborative effort of focused activity involving exploration, investigation and analysis.

Relationships, emotion and early development

Presence requires ‘engrossment’ as well as being ‘receptive’ to another (Noddings, 1984, p. 19). In respect of engagement with young children, presence has a relational nature in which one is available to children and actively attends or listens to the others (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 270). Rinaldi (2005) views listening as a metaphor representing how we need to use all of our senses to orient ourselves, as ECEC practitioners, to understanding children’s thinking and experiencing.

Sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together. (Rinaldi, 2005, p. 19)

If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations, and questions, and are
Rinaldi views the capacity for listening and reciprocal expectations as a quality of the mind and of the intelligence. However, gaining evidence of the capacity to listen to children is challenging. Some practitioners have described this as ‘style’, with style being found in a person’s demeanour. Other practitioners have used the word ‘awareness’ to convey the importance of the capacity to be alert to actions, communicative languages of physical action and body language as well as facial and verbal expression (Goodfellow, 1995). We know that availability and nurturing relationships provide a critical context for children’s intellectual, emotional and social growth (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000).

Research conducted within the area of affective neuroscience sheds light on how affectivity influences the development of a child’s adaptive social and emotional functions. These functions are critical to the processing and regulation of emotions and to the interaction between affective and cognitive development (Schore, 2001). The brain creates emotion and emotional circuits within the first few months of a baby’s life, and these circuits influence everything from communication, intellectual skills and decision-making to physical health and wellbeing (Eliot, 1999, p. 291). Eliot explains that even babies younger than six months have some form of emotional experience. However, the ‘emotional brain’ (p. 297) reaches its maximum density around age two when synaptic pruning begins to occur. It is the child’s environment and emotional relationships with others that largely influence this phase of synaptic refinement.

The emotional nature of ECEC practitioners’ work

The emotional work of ECEC practitioners involves feelings towards, protecting, supporting and being responsive to young children. There is a proliferation of studies (particularly in the US) that link the quality of ECEC practitioners with increased quality in early childhood programs (Saracho & Spodek, 2007). However, Early et al. (2007) found that increasing educational levels of ECEC practitioners alone may not necessarily result in improved quality or increased academic gains of children in early childhood programs. They argue that additional work is required in order to identify those personal competencies that have good outcomes for children and, in particular, the nature of relationships.

Empathy, trust, awareness and attunedness

Empathy refers to the ability to ‘be with’ and ‘feel with’ the other. This ability to ‘receive’ and ‘feel with the other’ are important aspects of caring relationships (Noddings, 1984). Further, the culture of caring is characterised by ‘affectivity’, ‘altruism’, ‘self-sacrifice’ and ‘conscientiousness’ (Osgood, 2006, p. 8). Empathy for and the capacity to listen to parents is also a critical role played by ECEC practitioners. Indeed, key determining factors in parents’ satisfaction with child care services include feeling that one is trusted and can trust in return, a sense of being listened to and being treated with respect by practitioners who are non-judgemental (National Family and Parenting Institute, in Robson, 2006).

While empathy is about authenticity and understanding in relationships, trust requires mutuality and confidence in the other. Trust is an essential aspect of presence because, in order to be present to a child, one needs to trust oneself and the child needs to feel trusted within the learning context. Trust and ‘deep knowing’ are necessary for ongoing presence to exist between adult and child (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

Awareness, like presence, reflects the capacity to bring one’s whole self to full attention so as to perceive what is happening at the moment (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). It involves listening and paying close attention to the other. It requires an ‘alert mind’ to hear, take notice of, observe and detect – focusing on what is happening in the moment rather than at the moment (Schon, 1983). It also involves registering in your mind that you have observed something; making a note of what has been observed, whether it be own actions or those of someone else; and interpreting or giving meaning to this (Goodfellow, 2001).

Awareness and presence are related because, at a personal level, presence is also about being present to oneself (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). If an ECEC practitioner acts according to prescribed routines or expectations that are externally constructed and without knowing and feeling attuned to the other, then they are less likely to be aware of presence.

Awareness is a prerequisite to attunedness. To be ‘in tune’ with a child is to appreciate the child’s way of knowing and feeling and the circumstances or context that surrounds that knowing. The phenomenon of attunedness is similar to caring presence (Fredriksson, 1999; Nelms, 1996). Attunedness does not exist in isolation. Early childhood practitioners who work with younger infants and babies and who are able to read their signals are often particularly adept at displaying attunedness and the emotionality of presence, as illustrated in the following incident:
It was during a mid-morning play where the caregiver had been interacting with two infants (aged 7 and 10 months) and was now observing them.

**First infant (directly to the second infant):** ‘Bub, bub, bub.’

**Second infant:** ‘Dad, dad, dad.’

**First infant (repeats):** ‘Bub, bub, bub.’

**Second infant:** ‘Mum, mum, mum.’

Caregiver reported to researcher: ‘This was an amazing, yet exciting, beginning of vocal communication between these two very young children and one that I was fortunate to witness.’ (Barns, 2005, p.9)

Osgood (2006, p.10) argues that we should not denigrate either the ethic of care or emotional labour as key elements of practitioners’ work, for they are the cornerstones of ECEC practitioners’ professional identity. The challenge is to consider how these elements are conveyed in both our images of being a professional within caring relationships and the practices in which we engage.

**Challenges to our image of the ECEC practitioner**

Professional practice can be viewed from at least three contrasting perspectives—a technical rational view; inquiry-oriented, evidenced-based practice; and humanistic traditions. Each of these takes a different view of the learning, experiencing, caring and educating.

**A technical rational perspective**

If one views the regulatory environment from a technical rational perspective, then ECEC practitioners can be seen as ‘technicians where autonomy is subordinated to increasing managerial regimes’ (Moss, 2006, p. 38). When issues of quality are considered from this perspective, then ECEC practitioners are identified as ‘subjects’ that act in particular ways with a view that the ‘doing’ will result in high-quality practices. Further, the technical rational perspective supports an increasingly intensive regulatory environment where there is an emphasis on technical competence and ‘performativity’ (Osgood, 2006, p. 6). That is, acknowledgement of and space given to ECEC practitioners’ practical wisdom becomes subsumed by regulation and managerial regimes (Fenelon, Sumson & Goodfellow, 2006; Moss, 2006).

Constructions of the regulatory environment in a technical-rational model limit the space for the unmanageable and unquantifiable emotional aspects of practice. Such constructions have little regard for ECEC practice as emotional labour that requires the practitioner to not only work with the emotions of children in their care, but also to possess particular dispositions in order to do this (Colley, 2006). An example is the dismantling of an existing universal quality improvement and accreditation system in Australia to focus on ‘assurance’ rather than ‘quality improvement’, with the potential result being a diminution of key quality practices because of limited attention to the emotional and less tangible aspects of practice (National Association of Community Based Children’s Services, personal communication, May 3, 2007; Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2007).

**An inquiry-oriented evidence-based perspective**

ECEC practitioners are in a particularly strong position to explore and elucidate the nature of their professional work through practitioner inquiry whereby the practitioners themselves seek practical solutions to issues and challenges in their professional lives. Cognitive and inquiry-oriented practices undertaken by ECEC practitioners enable them to gain understandings of their professional work in ways that can subsequently inform further practice (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007). Cognitive practices include thinking, reflecting and making judgements. Journalising, pedagogical documentation and practitioner inquiry/research are concrete examples of cognitive processes that require teachers to engage in thoughtful inquiry-oriented and evidence-based practice. However, reflective teaching, whether in making professional judgements or in the capacity to engage in trusting and compassionate relationships, cannot be reduced to a series of behaviours or skills (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

**A humanistic perspective**

From a humanistic perspective, ECEC practitioners’ work is situated within relationships. It is strongly child-centred in respect of health, safety and emotional/pro-social development as well as the enhancement of intellectual development (Friendly, Doherty & Beach, 2006). The nature of relationships is a key to quality childcare provision, and ECEC practitioners’ engagement in relationships with children and adults draws on their mental, physical, emotional and relational resources (Colley, 2006; Layzer & Goodson, 2006; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Further to this, if we view the child as strong, capable, competent and an active agent in the co-construction of meaning, then it is incumbent on us, as ECEC practitioners, to find democratic ways to cooperate with children rather than exert authority over them (Wagner, 2006).
ECEC practitioners’ presence is evident where they interact intensively with children as they use and move through the children’s spaces, and enhance children’s interests and the learning potential of the environment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). One example of such practice is working with emergent curriculum which necessitates listening to and collaborating with children. Wien (2006, p. 4) considers that emergent curriculum ‘requires steadfast attunedness’ and is ‘softer, messier and more uncertain’ than a more technical approach to working with children. However, the nature, extent and importance of emotional labour associated with ECEC professionals’ practices require further attention. Colley (2006) suggests that the danger in ignoring this is ECEC practitioners’ exploitation by others who perceive that their role equates with ‘mothering’ and therefore remains undervalued.

The challenge is to find ways to look beyond the obvious and further our understandings of the nature of caring presence. We need to critically appreciate what ECEC presence means for babies, preschoolers, professionals and parents. As practitioners, we have a responsibility to be mindful of and reflect on children’s thinking and experiencing, as well as how we support their everyday learning. We need to find ways to make visible the understandings about the emotional labour of child care. We need to move beyond the technical and acknowledge the personal aspects of our work and what Lefstein (2005) describes as ‘experiential wisdom’.

One investigative approach undertaken by Nelms (1996) in the field of nursing was through narrative inquiry and the interrogation of practice stories. Practitioner inquiry offers useful strategies, particularly if studies were undertaken using recently developed video analysis software such as StudioCode (Sportstec, personal communication, 2007). Digital video material offers opportunities for practitioners and researchers to view and review (frame by frame, if necessary) both text and actions that may demonstrate presence within the context of ongoing relationships. In this way it would be possible to gain deeper insights into the subtleties of adult/child interactions; make more explicit the multiple dimensions of early childhood professionals’ practices; examine our understandings of the personal, social and cultural contexts that shape those practices and the wellbeing of children; and illuminate the nature of presence. Such strategies can assist in the further development of our understandings about effective caring relationships and subsequently, the quality of care.

References


This paper describes a study of early childhood teachers’ (educators of children aged four – eight years in school settings) perceptions of key factors which impact on their ability to cope with the implementation of mandated educational change in the workplace. Using qualitative methodology including surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews, this study revealed that early childhood teachers’ attitudes and approaches to change impacted on their active engagement and continuance in their profession, as did the support they received from work colleagues and line managers. In addition, access to information and professional development sessions, as well as involvement in and ownership of the change process, further contributed to how they coped during implementation of educational change.

Introduction

In our world change is inevitable. As shifting economic, political, societal and technological forces interplay, they directly and indirectly influence every facet of our lives. Regardless of where we live, our occupation or social standing, change impacts on us all. How we cope with change influences our general wellbeing, active engagement and continuance within our chosen profession (Gold & Roth, 1993; Holmes, 2005; Institute for the Service Professions, 2005; Vandenberge & Huberman, 1999), thereby determining our quality of life and capacity to function in the world we live in.

Ongoing change has become a feature of most educational organisations and systems. Driven by the desire to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of educational services, ‘educational change’—in the form of imposed and mandated changes to policy, practice and resource allocation—has become commonplace. Educational change impacts on those working within these systems, challenging teachers in their roles as educators. Teachers are not only expected to persevere in their performance of teaching duties, but are also required to implement, at a school-based level, new initiatives and reforms mandated by the organisations they work for. Educational change in the workplace impacts on teachers’ beliefs and practices (Smylie, 1999), influencing their ability to ‘cope’; i.e., their ability to remain productively engaged in the act of teaching. The approach teachers adopt to cope with the implementation of mandated educational change also determines their ability to be ‘sustained’ (Holloway, 2003; Lokan, 2003); i.e. their ability to maintain professional engagement and competence as well as job satisfaction, a work-life balance and personal wellbeing.

In Australia, issues such as national standards of literacy and numeracy, boy’s education, Indigenous education, inclusion of students with special needs, the health and wellbeing of young children and increased access to early childhood education have altered the nature of teachers’ work (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003a; Commonwealth Taskforce on Child Development Health and Wellbeing, 2005). In Western Australia, educational reforms—including the Outcomes and Standards Approach, based on the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998) and the 2004 to 2007 Strategic Plan (Department of Education and Training, 2003b)—directly impact on early childhood teachers’ knowledge and pedagogical practice.

At the same time, trends within the Australian teaching profession, including the ageing and feminisation of
the profession, limit promotional opportunities and increase teacher accountability (Australian Education Union, 2003; Department of Education and Training, 2002, 2003a; Institute for the Service Professions, 2005) have resulted in changing work expectations.

Incidentes of teacher-job disillusionment, stress, burnout and attrition have been well documented (Angus & Olney, 2001; Department of Education and Training, 2003a; Lock, 1993; Scott, Skinner & Dinhem, 2002; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Without question, the nature of teachers’ work has become more complex, as has their ability to cope with the demands placed upon them.

Teachers are acknowledged as being the key factor in the successful implementation of educational change (Hargreaves, 1997; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001). The literature indicates that teachers’ attitudes and ability to collaborate are key factors contributing to successful educational reform (Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 1997; Hargreaves et al., 2001; Hargreaves & Evans, 1997; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins, 1998). Competencies associated with teachers’ emotional intelligence, including motivation and self-awareness, are also considered to be a factor in the ability of teachers to cope with educational change (Fullan, 1997; Goleman, 1995, 1998; Hargreaves et al., 2001). A review of the literature, however, also indicates that few researchers have investigated the impact of educational change in the field of early childhood education, a profession with its own particular demographical features. In Australia the early childhood teaching profession is predominantly female; for example, in Western Australia over 99 per cent of early childhood teachers are female (Department of Education and Training, 2006). Furthermore, Australian early childhood educators have historically operated in settings apart from other sectors of the profession, performing their teaching duties with the support of educational assistants (Kronemann, 2001; Press & Hayes, 1999). There appears to be scant evidence to confirm if the same factors described in the literature apply to teachers working in the early childhood profession. With early childhood education experiencing a surge in growth and reform, studies investigating early childhood teachers’ work-related practices are required (Fleer, 2000). Such research has the potential to contribute to maintaining quality delivery of service. This study is one attempt to address this discrepancy, and seeks to answer the following question:

**What factors contribute to early childhood teachers coping with the implementation of mandated educational change in the workplace, so that they are sustained in their daily teaching practice?**

**Method**

This study adopted a qualitative conceptual framework, based on constructivist beliefs that the world is inherently complex and that knowledge is active—a way of understanding, constructed through experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Prouix, 2006). In adopting a constructivist paradigm, the researcher acknowledged that the study’s findings may not be generalised to represent all early childhood educators. However, the derived findings were considered to be a source of reflection that may prove beneficial to other early childhood educators, depending on their own particular circumstances and experiences.

Qualitative methodology, in the form of descriptive surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews, was chosen to investigate early childhood teachers’ perceptions of factors contributing to their ability to cope with educational change. In keeping with this study’s conceptual framework, these forms of data collection and analysis were considered well-suited for allowing participants to elicit their own responses. Such approaches were also deemed well-suited to studies, such as this investigation, involving a small number of participants. Furthermore, the chosen methodology has been applied previously in educational research to provide an intimate insight into the nature of teachers’ work (Burns, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Lokan, 2003).

As part of a larger study into early childhood teachers’ sustainment, 63 early childhood teachers (educators of four to eight-year-old children) working in government schools and preschools in the northern metropolitan regions of Perth, Western Australia, were asked to describe those factors that contributed to their coping with the implementation of educational change in their daily teaching practice. Using qualitative methodology, 57 early childhood educators completed either an open-ended question survey (34 participants) or took part in one of four focus group sessions (21 participants), where they made both individual comments and indicated, with a show of hands, their agreement with comments made by other participants. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with six early childhood teachers who had taught for more than 20 years, were highly regarded within the profession, and who related their teaching experiences over the course of their professional lives. Participants involved in all forms of data collection were asked to nominate and describe those factors which contributed to their ability to cope with the implementation of imposed or mandated educational change in their daily teaching practice.

Data derived from this investigation, including survey forms and written transcripts, was individually analysed for key words and phrases, such as those relating to their attitudes, work colleagues, approach to implementing educational change, professional development and the
influence of line managers. For instance, where teachers commented that talking with other early childhood teachers or sharing teaching tasks with their education assistant contributed to their coping mechanisms, these comments were grouped together under the heading ‘work colleagues and professionals’. Key words were collated, tallied, tabled and presented as percentages to demonstrate the degree of common or unique understandings held by participants in the study. Participants’ comments were also included to elaborate on factors influencing their coping with the implementation of educational change.

Results and discussion

This study found that early childhood teachers’ ability to cope during the implementation of mandated educational change was influenced by a range of factors. Participants were able to describe how these factors impacted on their daily teaching practice, influencing their ability to cope with the implementation of the imposed changes and their ability to be sustained in the teaching profession. These factors are presented in Table 1 and discussed below.

Attitudes to educational change

Early childhood teachers in this study expressed the belief that having a ‘positive attitude’ towards imposed changes to educational policies and practices was critical to their coping with the implementation of reform at a school-based level. Approximately half of the study’s participants (50.8 per cent) identified that accepting educational change as part of their teaching role led them to be ‘willing to have a go’. These teachers indicated that maintaining a positive focus on impending changes led them to be proactive in seeking information and becoming involved in the change process. Furthermore, while three focus group participants (4.8 per cent) revealed that, where possible, they tended to avoid educational change, in particular ‘change for change’s sake’, these same teachers also commented that they coped best through maintaining a positive attitude.

Participants (20.6 per cent) also indicated that possessing a positive attitude led to their actively seeking information regarding proposed changes and the potential impacts on their teaching practice. As one participant commented:

I try to look at what it involves, delve into what it means. And then, if I know what’s going to come in, then I won’t fight it. I would just embrace it, and link it to what I know.

Interviewees, all experienced early childhood educators, disclosed how their willingness to accept change motivated them to attend professional development sessions and educational functions which provided a forum for discussion. Attendance at such functions not only enhanced their understanding of proposed changes but also enabled them to engage in professional discourse with like-minded professionals and share practical strategies for dealing with changes to the workplace. In addition, engaging in acts of professional networking engendered a shared understanding of proposed changes and reinforced participants’ positive focus.

Early childhood teachers in this study (9.5 per cent) also indicated that they were intrinsically motivated to become involved in the early stages of the implementation of educational reform. Participating in educational committees at a school-based, district-
wide or state-wide level helped them understand the rationale behind, and ramifications of, impending changes. Early involvement in the change process also contributed to teachers developing a sense of being ‘part of the big picture’. Through their early involvement in the process these teachers were able to focus on the long-term benefits of educational reforms and maintain their positive attitudes towards the implementation of change.

For participants in this study, intrinsic motivation appeared to facilitate their acceptance and adoption of mandated educational change. Furthermore, the findings suggest that early childhood teachers’ attitudes to educational change have the potential to impact on their ability to cope and be sustained during the change process. These findings are supported by the literature, identifying teachers’ intrinsic motivation, positive attitudes, and components of a person’s emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998, p.26) as factors that contribute to the successful implementation of educational change (Hargreaves, 1997; Hargreaves et al., 2001; Hargreaves & Evans, 1997).

Work and professional colleagues

Early childhood teachers’ work and association with professional colleagues (49.2 per cent) were also identified as key factors contributing to teachers’ coping with the implementation of educational change. In this study, early childhood teachers described how their colleagues, including education assistants, provided moral and physical support in implementing changes to classroom practice. Furthermore, professional colleagues acted as a source of clarification of proposed changes, sharing their knowledge and suggesting practical strategies. Focus group participants, who worked in settings where several early childhood classes were grouped together, referred to the benefits of being able to collaborate with professional colleagues and ‘learn together’. As one interview participant stated, ‘We’re starting to get a bit more work-smart and realise to cope with all this change we need to start working together more, helping one another’. Developing a team approach engendered a supportive work environment, further strengthening participants’ capacity to implement changes to their teaching practice.

Interview participants also indicated that, at particular times in their careers, a mentor relationship with a professional peer contributed to deepening their understanding of early childhood pedagogy, practices and the impact of proposed changes. One interview participant explained:

I think having Lee (pseudonym) as a close colleague, thinking the same way and being able to do a lot of collaboration with her, has sustained both of us here. Because we’ve often said that you have to have somebody in the school you can talk to.

Engaging in dialogue with a like-minded professional provided a further form of support, strengthening their resolve and ability to cope with the change process. Such findings are supported by Wenger’s (1998) work on communities of practice, identifying that when groups of people with a shared concern interact regularly they are more likely to succeed at solving or mastering that particular problem (Wenger, 1998). Literature on educational change (Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves et al., 2001) also supports these findings.

Approach to implementing educational change

This study found that the approach early childhood teachers adopted when implementing educational change also impacted on their coping abilities. Participants in this study (30.1 per cent) revealed that rather than accepting proposed changes on face value, they rationalised the worth of reforms and were selective in their implementation. As one interview participant stated:

I like knowing what I’m doing and where I’m going. When I try out, or go through educational change … I’ll take it on and look at things for a while. I don’t take it on straight away though, when some things are introduced. I’ll look and I’ll think about it for a while … With the children working, I try to visualise how they’re going to be, what they’ll be doing and if that sort of thing would work.

Participants (20.6 per cent) also disclosed that prior to the implementation of change they sought information on what the proposed changes involved, and then engaged in professional dialogue with peers and reflective thinking to determine how the proposed changes impacted on their pedagogical beliefs and practices. Reflective thinking enabled these early childhood teachers to recognise their own limitations and make decisions regarding what changes they could feasibly accommodate in their daily teaching practice. Consequently, self-awareness and rationalisation, traits associated with a competent emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998; Stein & Book, 2001) contributed to their coping with change.

Furthermore, participants (20.6 per cent) indicated that they adapted the change process to suit their current circumstance. Several described how they implemented a select few changes over an extended period of time. Participants also commented that
during this time they made modifications and ‘streamlined’ their teaching practice to ensure they continued to meet student needs. As one explained: ‘I use my knowledge and think. I don’t just take anything on. I choose what I think is appropriate.’ Once again, self-awareness and recognition of competing needs (traits of competent emotional intelligence) led these teachers to regulate the change process so they could maintain personal wellbeing, a work-life balance and teaching competence. Making modifications to the selection and implementation of educational change also contributed to these early childhood educators having a degree of autonomy, a sense of control over their professional lives. Such a strategy is perceived to enhance teacher wellbeing (Holmes, 2005) and has also been linked to teacher empowerment (Schmoker, 1997), where teachers are perceived to take on greater ownership of educational change, increasing the likelihood of the successful implementation of proposed reforms.

**Professional development sessions and affiliations**

In this study, nearly a third of the participants (30.1 per cent) identified that attending professional development sessions enhanced their ability to cope with the implementation of educational change. Such sessions not only informed early childhood teachers of proposed changes but also provided an opportunity to engage in discourse with professional peers and clarify their understanding of what was involved in implementing proposed reforms. Interview participants also described how ‘accessing experts in the field’, through attending quality professional development sessions and affiliating with professional associations, contributed to their gaining an in-depth understanding of proposed changes. Knowing the rationale behind educational changes—‘the big picture’—provided these teachers with a sense of direction, ‘a shared vision’, sustaining their motivation and commitment to the change process. In addition, knowledge gained from such sources formed the basis of discourse with professional peers and reflective thinking, facilitating their rationalisation of personal pedagogical beliefs and practices and the impact of proposed reforms. These findings are in keeping with literature on educational change (Hargreaves et al., 2001), affirming the view that professional development sessions and opportunities for professional networking are significant contributors to the successful implementation of educational change.

**Role of the line manager**

Line managers (17.5 per cent), mostly primary school principals, also played a significant role in early childhood teachers’ coping abilities. Participants indicated that while line managers did not provide them with direct support every day, those who were influential did offer them opportunities for professional development and attendance at functions involving networking with professional colleagues. Participants appreciated line managers who involved them in decision-making processes within the school and kept them informed of impending changes. As one interview participant elaborated:

“The principal who has been with us for 18 months or so is a very collaborative person … and he’s made a great effort to make sure that everyone feels involved. He’s made a big effort to make sure everyone feels included in the decision-making. And even if the decision may not affect me, he still values what I have to say.”

Encouragement from select line managers also contributed to interview participants seeking recommended educational literature and extending their role beyond the classroom, to take on administrative and collaborative roles in the change process. These findings are in keeping with research indicating that school leaders’ capacity to inform and engage teachers in the change process directly influences teacher commitment and the effectiveness of educational reform (Crosswell & Elliott, 2003; Schmoker, 1997).

**Conclusion**

This study identified that acceptance of impending change is a key factor in early childhood teachers coping with its implementation in their workplace. Knowing that ‘change wouldn’t go away’ resulted in participants in this study adopting a proactive stance, and contributed to their willingness to be informed and actively engaged in the change process. Affirming the reviewed literature (Fullan, 1997; Hargreaves et al., 2001), the findings of this study indicated that possessing a strong emotional intelligence contributes to early childhood teachers coping with educational change. Many of the traits associated with a competent emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Stein & Book, 2001) enhanced participants’ ability to maintain motivation and commitment to their teaching duties while implementing change at a school-based level. Self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and social skills, and the desire to collaborate and problem-solve with others helped these early childhood educators to maintain a positive focus and active involvement in the change process. In addition, the ability to engage in professional discourse and reflective thinking practices helped them develop...
Furthermore, as support has been identified as a key factor in teachers coping with implementation of educational change, research into developing support mechanisms within the profession, at peer, administrative and organisational level, is also recommended. In addition, research into the impact of teacher autonomy and work-based support, may further contribute to the successful implementation of mandated reforms, as well as the continued wellbeing and performance of the teaching profession.

As Hargreaves (1998, p.281) warns, where educational change is too broad, too fast, poorly resourced or lacks long-term commitment, it is doomed to failure. The early childhood teachers in this study indicated that they could maintain commitment to the implementation of educational change in the workplace when given the right encouragement, support and power to modify the change process to suit their particular situations.

References


To celebrate our 70th anniversary, Early Childhood Australia is inviting all past and current members to send in memories and highlights of ECA and the early childhood field.

- What are the joyous moments that you will remember forever?
- What have been the biggest obstacles you’ve overcome?
- What challenges are you still faced with?

Share your thoughts and memories—celebrate ECA’s work and strengthen the bonds with other members of the field!

Email us: eca@earlychildhood.org.au
Write to us: PO Box 7105, Watson ACT 2602
Encouraging the reflection process in undergraduate teachers using guided reflection

Andrea Nolan
Deakin University

THIS PAPER REPORTS ON the findings of a study conducted with a group of early childhood education undergraduate students. The study trialled a number of guided reflection techniques that acted to stimulate and provide a structure for reflection. These techniques were further supplemented by focus group discussions based on reflective principles, in the hope of fully engaging the students in the reflective process over the course of a year. All techniques were designed to assist the student teachers in becoming aware of the current philosophy they hold in relation to teaching and learning, and also in understanding how this has been shaped by past experiences, beliefs and knowledge. The effectiveness of the guided reflection techniques were evaluated by the participants at the end of the project. The surveys showed that three of the techniques were particularly successful. Student perceptions as to the success of the process are reported in this paper.

Introduction

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the benefits of reflection as a practice for teachers (Artzt & Armour Thomas, 2002; Margolis, 2002; Mayes, 2001a, 2001b; Moore, 2002; Rock & Levin, 2002; Swain, 1998). However, earlier debates centred on the difficulties of defining what reflection is—making it problematic to implement—and whether it could be reasonably expected that pre-service teachers had the capacity or inclination to critically reflect. Current literature proposes more clearly defined indicators of reflection and levels to aspire to, and the notion that the skills for reflection can be taught and should play a major role in pre-service teacher education courses.

Through engagement in the reflection process, teachers are provided with the opportunity to generate connections between theory and practice, and deepen their understandings in relation to their beliefs and experiences while adopting fresh perspectives (Risko, Vukelich, Roskos & Carpenter, 2002). As Corcoran and Leahy (2003) state, ‘successful teachers are fully engaged in the reflective process’ (p. 33). The ability to systematically and deliberately use reflection as a learning tool in professional practice, however, requires conscientious development over time in pre-service and post-service courses (Atkins, 2005). The literature is clear that the development of reflective practice requires skilled facilitation and appropriate guidance and support from educators (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Paget, 2001; Johns, 2004).

Engaging student teachers in the reflective process

While there is a growing consensus among teacher educators as to the value of reflection in the development of teachers, according to Ward and McCotter (2004), the process of reflection itself has been ‘an invisible process to many of our pre-service teachers’ (p. 255). If this is the case, it is of utmost importance that student teachers are introduced to the practice of reflection in a supportive environment so that they can think critically about learning and teaching.

Authors such as Mezirow (1981), Brockbank and McGill (1988), Kim (1999) and Bolton (2001) all emphasise that reflective practice is a learning and developmental process enacted through the examination of one’s own practice, including experiences, thoughts, feelings, actions and knowledge. In other words, for student teachers to fully engage in reflection they need to have a clear view of their own philosophy and be prompted to consider how their beliefs,
experiences and knowledge have shaped the theories they apply to teaching and learning. Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy and Nosworthy (2004) suggest that ‘reflection is about looking inside yourself or upon your experiences to make sense of or improve the situations and your experiences in it’ (p. 220). Working from an awareness and understanding of their own beliefs and values, student teachers can then be challenged to consider a wider range of discourses, an aspect that Phelan (2001) argues is vital in recognising the discourses that shape and often restrict thinking. Viewing reflection in this way, the focus comes from a personal/practice orientation so that students gain an understanding of their own beliefs which act to shape their practice. As Larrivee (2000) states, ‘Without tying teaching decisions to beliefs about the teaching/learning process and assumptions about, and expectations for students, teachers will have only isolated techniques. Unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery, they stay trapped in unexamined judgements, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations’ (p. 294).

While it is difficult moving student teachers beyond personal frames of reference to draw on a broader range of more critical discourses (see study by Johnson, 2002), an important starting point is to establish an awareness and understanding of previous experiences that have shaped professional identity. A study by Nolan, Brown and Deans (2006) found student teachers, when engaged in processes that guided them in their reflections, were more able to gain a better understanding of their beliefs, values and experiences which impacted on their emerging early childhood professional profile. These student teachers acknowledged how the guided reflection process had encouraged ‘deep’ reflection and had challenged them to ‘reasses’ their ‘professional identity’.

Leshem and Trafford (2006) have found that ‘encouraging student teachers to think about their past raises their reflections and learning to a meta-level of appreciation’ (p. 23). This is also supported by Strong-Wilson (2006), who views childhood stories as especially powerful in shaping teachers’ perceptions of self and others. It is therefore important that student teachers are asked to recall and reflect on aspects of their childhood and past experiences. ‘When teachers connect stories that have been important to them with counter-stories that they have implicitly excluded, they “waken” to their landscapes of learning’ (Strong-Wilson, 2006, p. 110).

The inclusion of some type of group discussion also appears to be an important aspect of engaging student teachers in the reflection process. When reflecting on personal stories and incidents and then sharing these thoughts in a supportive peer group environment, consideration can be given to the social, political, historical, economical and ethical contexts that have shaped our identity. As Greene (1995) states, by becoming more aware of our own stories we become open to the stories of others. Discussion with others tends to provide alternate perspectives, which solitary working within personal epistemologies and beliefs may hamper (Waite & Gatrell, 2004). Fisher (2003) proposes that dialogue between teacher and learners, and between fellow learners, is necessary to obviate the possibilities of self-deception which critical reflection as self-reflection invites (Brookbank & McGill, 1998). The importance of and emphasis on group dialogue therefore becomes an essential part of the process.

The guided reflection project

Five student teachers from the second year of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education course offered at The University of Melbourne volunteered as participants for this study which involved them working through planned experiences and then sharing their responses in four focus group meetings throughout the year. In preparation for each meeting the student teachers were asked to undertake certain experiences using a variety of guided reflection techniques. Their responses then formed the basis of discussion at the meetings. The intention of the focus group meetings was to expose the participants to ‘other ways of thinking’ that perhaps they had not contemplated, while becoming clearer about their own philosophy. The meetings revisited and questioned their philosophy statements in light of their reflections, requiring them to consider why they believed what they believed. The meetings acted as a way of providing time, and a safe and nurturing place where thinking and talking about thinking could take place with the aim to become ‘more wise and courageous actors in the world’ (Wheatley, 2002, p. 9).

The reflection techniques

While the literature nominates a variety of approaches to facilitate the development of reflection, the study reported here used a learning experience approach interspersed with focus groups. By using a variety of techniques it was hoped to enable students to be fully engaged in the reflection process. For each planned experience there were accompanying questions to guide the student teachers in their reflections, and the complexity of what was required of the participants intensified over the course of the project. The techniques were designed to assist the participants to become more knowledgeable about the formulation of their current philosophy of teaching and learning, while being supported in their understanding of the processes that impact on this. The student teachers were asked to:
Recall past experiences, memories and critical incidents
This involved them recalling their own school days and the qualities and characteristics displayed by some of their own teachers; connecting with their own childhood memories about learning; and applying a framework (Gibbs, 1988) to analyse a critical incident in their own development.

Consider personal qualities
In light of the admirable qualities student teachers recalled of their own teachers, they were asked to think about the qualities they themselves displayed and how these mapped with characteristics and qualities they considered important in being a teacher.

Draw
This planned experience asked student teachers to draw their representation of what a teacher looked like.

Use metaphor
An animal or combination of animals had to be chosen to closely match each student teacher’s idea of a teacher. Choices then had to be explained.

Create a montage
Through the resources provided (magazines) student teachers constructed a montage to represent their philosophy of teaching and learning.

Develop a glossary of terms
Student teachers were asked to develop their own glossary of terms commonly used in early childhood education which were important to them.

Read and comment on journal articles
A number of prescribed articles outlining differing views of education needed to be read and reflected on according to the accompanying questions about teaching and learning.

Consider photographic images
The student teachers were provided with a selection of photographs depicting children involved in different learning contexts (formal school settings, natural settings, etc.) on which they were asked to comment.

Data collection
Each participant in the project was given a large blank scrapbook in which to assemble all completed experiences and to note any issues they wished to share at the meetings. These books were brought to each meeting and referred to by the student teachers during the discussion. At the end of the project the books were collected and the data copied for further analysis. The meetings were audio-taped and later transcribed. These transcriptions became part of the database.

Student teacher perceptions of the project
As a way of ascertaining the participants’ perceptions about the project, an evaluation survey was created asking participants to rate the project’s effectiveness on a scale of zero to five (zero being not at all effective and five being extremely effective) and comment on each of the guided reflection techniques in relation to how each had:

- impacted on their ability to reflect more deeply about teaching and learning
- acted to clarify their teaching philosophy
- helped make connections between personal beliefs and teaching and learning
- assisted them in gaining a better understanding of underlying influences on their own development as a teacher.

The data from the survey clearly showed that, of the techniques implemented, some were considered more helpful than others in aiding reflection. Analysing their own past school experiences, creating a montage, and reading and commenting on journal articles were identified by the participants as being the most effective techniques to aid their reflection. Overall,
all techniques were looked on favourably as helping
the participants to consider teaching and learning,
with the effectiveness rating of these being strongly
influenced by the learning styles of each participant;
i.e. drawing activity was difficult for some participants
while others found this very useful.

The evaluation survey required the student teachers
to comment on the most enjoyable aspects of the
project, the extent the project impacted on their
ability to reflect, the usefulness of the focus group
meetings and the timing of the project in relation to
their own development as teachers.

Enjoyable aspects
When commenting on the most enjoyable aspects of
being part of the project, the focus group meetings
featured in all students’ comments. The participants
valued this forum as it provided them with the
opportunity to hear other people’s reflections and
express their own opinions. As one participant wrote,
‘They [the focus group meetings] were so stimulating.
I could have sat there for hours!’

Project impact on ability to reflect
When asked to comment on the impact the project
had on one’s ability to reflect, one student teacher
wrote:

Each part of the guided reflection project made you
think hard about what you believe in and we were
challenged personally as well as professionally
about what you really believe in.

Another student commented:
I do a lot of mental self-evaluation as it is but I’m
finding that I have started to do a lot more now
without realising it.

Four of the five participants rated the project as
having a ‘large impact’ on their ability to reflect, with
the other participant choosing the ‘some impact’
response.

Usefulness of focus group meetings
All participants valued the focus group meetings
as assisting them to reflect further. Comments
suggested that these group times had often acted
as the impetus for the participants to reflect on their
own philosophy:

I often came away from meetings and reflected
further because of what other people had said.
This helped me to further clarify my thoughts.

Other people’s suggestions or comments spurred
my mind on to come up with other ideas or
thoughts.

It got me thinking why I agree/disagree with
other’s comments and the main reasons for this.
As well as to reflect on my personal experiences,
comparing them to the others’ and thinking about
why I feel/think the way I do.

By listening to other people’s feelings and beliefs
it challenged your beliefs and also aided in your
thoughts.

Hearing other people’s responses to the tasks
helped me to reflect even further and deepen my
beliefs and ideas. The tasks provided the stimulus
but it was the discussion I found most valuable.

It was encouraging to note how participants would
often raise issues that for them were unresolved
from the previous discussion group, or refer to how
certain points in the previous discussion had acted as
a catalyst for them to reflect further.

Timing of project
Another question in the evaluation survey was about
the relevance of participation in the project at this
stage of the student teacher’s preparation. All student
teachers rated their participation as extremely useful
and relevant. Some saw it as a good time to begin to
analyse their thoughts about teaching and learning in
more depth, having completed an initiate year of the
degree course. For one student, participation helped
her clarify where she stood in relation to what had
been taught so far in the course.

Discussion
It is clear from the data that student teachers valued
the experience of being part of the project and felt
that it directly impacted on their own professional
development, especially in relation to clarifying their
own thoughts on teaching and learning.

I have never been able to stand up confidently and
express what I believe in before now, especially
with my course, as I never knew what my beliefs
were; it wasn’t clear until now.

To varying degrees the different planned experiences
guided the student teachers in their reflections, with
most participants agreeing that their own level of
reflection had deepened as a result of participating
in the project. The importance of the focus group
meetings stands out as significant in enabling this
deeper level of reflection, with students commenting
on this effect. These group meetings not only provided
the participants with a forum where they were able
to articulate their own philosophies and hear the
thoughts of others, but also acted as a stimulus for
further individual reflection.
Implications for early childhood teacher preparation

If we consider Dewey’s (1933) notion that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through experience, it makes sense that we engage student teachers in talking about their beliefs, values and experiences which act to shape this knowledge. By involving student teachers in a variety of reflection techniques in which they are guided in the mapping and analysing of their developing identity as a teacher, and providing a forum for discussion about their perceptions, they will have the opportunity to gain better understandings of the underlying influences on this development. This was true for most of the participants in the guided reflection project reported here. As has been shown by other studies (Lones, 2000), having students present discuss and critique their practice with others helps them to be more able to realise their own current experience in a more detailed and meaningful way. In teacher preparation programs small group dialogue could take place during tutorial sessions as a way of enabling students to share their reflections.

McKendree, Small, Stenning and Conlon (2002) and Leung and Kember (2003) suggest that students need to be taught the skill of critical reflection, and this requires further consideration as to how this can be embedded within pre-service courses. What is encouraging is the increasing belief that reflective practice can and should be taught (Russell, 2005), and that any weakness in a student’s ability to reflect may be remedied using the guided reflection process trialled in this study. While the findings point to successful strategies that appear to enhance students’ capacity to reflect on teaching and learning, it must be stressed that this was a small scale study, undertaken by willing students.

Conclusion

Being critically aware of how teaching and learning approaches are shaped by experience, beliefs and values is viewed as a professional attribute necessary for effective beginning teachers (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1998). It is therefore important that teacher educators guide student teachers in the reflective process, helping them build an awareness of their own ‘theory’ from which decisions are informed, as well as aiding them to engage in a deeper level of reflection. Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Bailey (2000) view this as a primary mission of teacher education courses and something that should be present throughout courses. This project, although on a small scale, adopted a deliberate approach to guiding reflection and provided a forum for sharing reflections. The findings show that, according to the student teachers involved, their ability to reflect did improve, and that reflecting on existing knowledge and practice and sharing experiences is a powerful form of learning (Williams, 1998).

References


**Acknowledgements**

This research would not have been possible without the willingness and commitment demonstrated by Cassandra, Ebony, Elysia, Kristan and Sheena. The author wishes to thank them sincerely for their participation.
Computer use by preschool children
Rethinking practice as digital natives come to preschool

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THIS PAPER REPORTS ON the outcomes of a survey implemented in a large regional community of Australia. The survey was completed by parents of children aged four–five years and attending local early childhood centres. The survey identified the types of access and use of computers by preschool children. It was found that the children of the respondents had significant access to computers in the home (85%) and were skilled in many facets of computer use. Computers were used for a range of activities, some educational and others recreational. Gender differences in computer use were also noted. The study highlights the changing clientele of early childhood settings and the implications for practice in a field where computer technology is often seen as the antithesis of good practice.

THE WORLD OF MOST WESTERN children has undergone significant changes in the past few decades, brought about significantly by the uptake of computers. Yet early childhood philosophy has been one where particular notions have remained relatively consistent throughout this period. Indeed, some educators see the use of technology as the antithesis of good practice in these settings. This paper documents the use of computers by young children and the skills and dispositions they bring to early childhood settings. It is proposed that the outcomes of this study indicate that young children have extensive exposure to computers in their out-of-school contexts and that early childhood settings need to recognise the changes within their clientele; their concomitant dispositions to learning and activity; and the implications these have for the provision of quality learning environments that enhance the learning for many children while seeking to address the potential digital divide for those from digitally poor families.

We locate this paper with the literature that acknowledges the impact of technology on young people who have grown up in social conditions where digital technology has been an integral part of their lives. We contend that the digital media children are exposed to may offer new potential for both children and the pedagogy in early childhood settings. Depending on the theoretical perspective one adopts, there is a well-established language of description for this cohort of people. They may be known as ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001, 2005), ‘Generation Y’, (Charp, 2003; Zabel, 1999) or ‘millennials’ (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Zemke, 2001). Collectively, this literature recognises the distinct and defining characteristics of these young people as being quite different from previous generations. While this literature has tended to focus on older children and young adults, we sought to explore the ways preschool children may be engaging with digital media in the home and how this may impact on early childhood pedagogy. We contend that young children coming into early childhood settings may be different from other generations because of the social and technological conditions within which they are developing. At the same time, we consider the professional development of teachers with regard to the use of technologies in early childhood settings. While there is an international recognition of the potential of computer technology to create new learnings and environments, this has not been realised (Cuban, 2003). This is exacerbated in the context of early childhood, where digital technologies are seen to be oppositional to the ideologies that underpin what is seen as quality teaching in the learning settings.
We pose the question that if young children are coming to early childhood contexts with a repertoire of digital skills and dispositions, what are the implications for the provision of relevant, quality educational experiences for the children attending these centres? This is particularly pertinent when educators espouse a ‘child-centred’ approach to their teaching. ‘Positioning the computer as separate from children’s development and learning within the early childhood educational context is arguably akin to denying the role it plays in their sociocultural experiences outside the educational setting,’ (Marsh, 2002, p. 133, cited in Edwards, 2005). Furthermore, it may be compounded by the potential digital divide, where students have different experiences of digital technologies. There is a responsibility for early childhood educators to consider the impact of these differences and seek to redress them before the gap widens.

### Computers, access and young children: The emergence of the digital native into preschool settings

Prensky (2001) has been a notable writer on the phenomenon of the digital native. He argued that this generation, having grown up immersed in technology, has begun to think differently from other generations (Prensky, 2005). While his work has been with older members of this generation, the point he makes in relation to the ways digital technologies shape the identities of young adults is equally pertinent to young children. This young generation has been immersed in technology since their emergence into that world. Their homes have computer technology in all facets of gadgetry—the remote control for the television, the programmable microwave, the remote and mobile telephone, computers, digital games (such as Xbox, as well as those on the computer). These offer significantly different ways of playing from what had been possible in non-digital worlds (Zevenbergen, 2007).

Prensky (2005) identifies a number of defining characteristics of digital natives. The extent to which these can be applied to children in the preschool years is not well known. Prensky argues that digital natives are more connected than other generations through technologies such as mobile phones, email and chat lines. Communication is a much more connected and global experience for this generation than has been possible in the past. This generation has been exposed to an economy in ways markedly different from their predecessors. They have been targeted by marketers to a much greater extent than any other generation. One only has to consider the music industry and the ‘pop groups’ that have developed to cater for this generation. Also, purchasing processes have changed radically through avenues such as eBay, Amazon or even local groceries being purchased via the web. Similarly, bills can be paid through BPAY or over the phone. Cash transactions are minimal, with most payments being made through swipe cards.

The immediacy of these technologies has created a phenomenon of instant feedback. Whether playing games, wanting to purchase items or seeking to contact a person, most of the experiences of young children result in very quick feedback. Whether turning on the computer, cooking food in the microwave or changing channels on the TV, the delay from pushing the button to receiving a response is minimal. This generation has grown up in times where the potential for instant feedback (and gratification) is nearly always part of their interactions. The speed in response time also creates new learning environments in terms of information processing. The fast speed from action (click of mouse) to effect (the result of that click) means that young children process information quickly.

The range of resources available to them has created new dispositions among young children. The potential for multitasking has been a phenomenon of the digital native. Working on many tools simultaneously is a characteristic that defines this generation. While we could not find substantive research on this aspect of digital natives’ behaviour, many parents and teachers comment on how older children use multiple resources simultaneously—the mobile phone, the Xbox, music, television—and interact with peers. Clearly, a research agenda needs to be developed around the impact of these social conditions on learning and the potential for learning. However, we would suggest that observational data indicates that young people are prone to multitask in ways that were not possible for their parents. When this multitasking tendency begins to appear could not be identified in the research literature, but we would suggest that its emergence could begin in the early years, particularly with those children who grow up in technology-rich homes.

The literature has shown that older members of this generation have developed considerably different dispositions from those possible among their predecessors: this being a consequence of digital technologies; in particular, computers. What is less well-known is how these changes are affecting the lives of preschool children. Furthermore, depending on the impact of information computer technologies (ICTs) in the lives and experiences of young children in their out-of-school contexts, early childhood education may need to seriously consider the changing dispositions of the children it works with.
Computers and early childhood pedagogy

The early childhood sector has been heavily influenced by particular views of child development and how children learn. Such views are often based on developmental psychology and seek to develop practices that are developmentally appropriate (Hirsh, 2004). More recently, emergent approaches such as Reggio have influenced practice but are more focused on curriculum organisation. Within the Reggio approach, there is potential for the incorporation of computer technology (Hong & Trepanier-Street, 2004; Wurm, 2005).

The dominance of developmental approaches has resulted in relatively stable models of practice within the sector. However, when considering the potential effect of technology (particularly computers) on young children, this may need to be considered within the development of appropriate models of learning and pedagogy (Rivera, Galarza, Entz & Tharp, 2002).

Technologies have been embraced by early childhood teachers as a form of documentation but less so for use by the children. Haugland (2000) has noted that early childhood educators should be cautious about when children start using computers. Once children use computers, the activities that are chosen should be developmentally appropriate. It has been consistently documented that ‘the use of developmentally appropriate, open-ended software serves to support children’s learning and contributes to their developing understanding of key mathematical concepts’ (Yelland, 1999).

In this section we discuss the research that has explored the power of computers to change the ways of learning among young children. It is our intention to highlight the potential of this tool in the sector. At the same time, we draw on other literature that highlights the failure of the sector to embrace these technologies.

Within the Australian context, there is generally poor uptake of computers in early childhood settings (Downes, Arthur & Beecher, 2001) and there are considerable obstacles in the way of teachers using such technology in these settings (O’Rourke & Harrison, 2004). This is not the case in some other countries. For example, it was reported that 66 per cent of Finnish settings regularly use ICTs as part of their programs (Kankaanranta & Kangassalo, 2003); while in Hong Kong, Leung (2003) reported that parents expect their children to use ICTs in their early childhood settings. Clearly there is a rapid increase in computer implementation in this sector. Downes, Arthur and Beecher (2001) argued that the lack of computers in many early childhood settings is partly because of a resistance within the field and wider community with the tools regarded as ‘neither appropriate or important’ (p. 139) in these settings. The views held by early childhood educators with regard to ICT usage are linked to their views of ‘appropriate childhood’ (Sheridan & Pramlin-Samuelsson, 2003, p. 277). A large study among Turkish early childhood educators indicated that the teachers thought computers had a negative impact on social development (Bayhan, Olgun & Yelland, 2002). Seeking to identify quality practice in early childhood settings, Creasey, Jarvis and Berk (1998) reported that concrete activities were valued as being synonymous with quality practices. Thus the digital environment, not being concrete, is less valued. Another reason for the poor uptake of computers is the shortage of fiscal resources. Downes et al. (2001) argued that while the lack of funds to support the purchase of computers is part of the problem, equally problematic is resourcing the professional development of early childhood teachers. The lack of access to financial resources was reiterated by the Finnish teachers cited earlier.

Judge, Puckett and Cabuk (2004) have reported that it is increasingly important for early childhood educators to introduce and use computers in their settings, particularly for those children who do not have access in the home. Providing learning opportunities at preschool means that these children are better prepared for their school experiences. Offering access to computers in the early childhood setting helps to reduce the digital divide that occurs at school when those who have had access in the home are better prepared for school activities.

There is considerable literature that documents the potential of ICTs to create innovative, engaging and substantive learning opportunities for young children. For example, Pastor and Kerns (1997) show the excitement made possible through children using digital cameras and producing quality documents. More related to curriculum, Clements (2002) has shown that children working in pairs at the computer engaged more than when working on puzzles on the floor. Yelland (2002) explored the use of computers in the home to develop mathematical ideas and reported that there was considerable potential for computer games to support such learning. Similarly, working at computers has been found to create opportunities for the development of social skills (Lau, 2000). Studies have found that open-ended, child-directed software made a more significant difference in children’s developmental gains than did ‘drill and practice’ software (Haugland, 1997).

The research sought to identify the amount of access and ways in which preschool children used computers in the home. We sought to find out how young children (four–five years) used computers, the skills they were developing, and the links with home and formal
learning environments. We undertook this through a survey in which parents reported their children’s use of computers at home.

**Method**

A survey was developed and implemented in a major regional area of Australia. The community has a socially, economically and demographically diverse population of more than 100,000. The survey sought to identify the amount of computer usage by four–five-year-old children; the types of computer usage; the frequency with which children accessed the computer (where and for what purposes), and their skills. Two different scalings were used. Some questions sought to identify where and how young children accessed and used computers (and so only a check mark was needed), whereas the frequency of use was documented by Likert scaling, where a 1–3 rating scale was used. There was scope for further comments by the respondents but this was infrequently used.

All centres in the region (n=45) were approached to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study, and surveys were sent to those centres who expressed interest. Centre staff then distributed the surveys to families, who were provided with information sheets, informed-consent forms and reply-paid envelopes for mailing their responses. It was felt that this process would enable families to respond freely and openly. More than 600 surveys were distributed to the interested centres and 150 responses were received. This made an approximate return rate of 25 per cent.

The table shows the initial expressions of interest and final participation rates. The initial expressions of interest from private/corporate and community-based centres were 66.6 per cent and 92.3 per cent respectively. These figures were calculated on the number of private/corporate/community-based centres in the region so that they are an indication for each sector. Data was received from 33.3 per cent of the private centres, 40 per cent of the corporate centres, and 69 per cent of the community-based centres. Responses were received from 55.5 per cent of the centres in the region. The data indicates that there was an adequate representation of centres from different sectors.

Some centres were hubs where parents from across the region would place their children, whereas others were very much a part of their local communities. Thus some centres were quite diverse in their client base and others were quite homogenous. It was possible to question the data from the latter group about particular social factors in relation to the responses.

**Results and discussion**

In the following sections we discuss the results collated from the surveys. Using descriptive statistics to analyse the data, we found some interesting and surprising trends. These will be discussed under the key organisers on which the study was based.

**Computer access**

As a starting point, we sought to identify where and how children were able to access computers and the frequency of that access. Some students reported that they had multiple sources of access—a home computer, grandparents’ and a parent’s work computer, for example. The figures indicate the percentage of students who had particular forms of access. 87.31 per cent of the respondents indicated that their children had access to a computer in the home.

The data in Table 2 suggests that the majority of the respondents accessed computers in their own homes but could also access them elsewhere. Only a limited number (4.48%) reported having no access to computers. Approximately 95 per cent of the cohort have access to computers—with most having access in the home. However, a word of caution is needed here. The self-selection process may have favoured those parents who had computer access in the home. It may be that families without such access may not have returned the survey. However, we would also point out that there were a number of respondents who did indicate that they had no access to computers at all.

**Table 2. Access to computers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Borrowed</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Other family</th>
<th>No access</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>81.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>91.03</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>11.53</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>23.08</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Frequency of access to computers

In seeking to understand how young children access and use computers, one survey question was about the frequency of access across a range of settings. We sought to identify how frequently computers were used in the home, in early childhood settings and for various functions—playing/recreation, educational purposes and creative purposes. By seeing how often the computers were used in these various contexts, it would be possible to gain a sense of the potential of the computers.

Using a Likert scale where 0=never; 1=sometimes; 2=regular; 3=frequent, we asked parents to rate the amount of their children's computer use for a nominated purpose. Recognising the limitations of using a Likert-scale model—in terms of it not being a continuous scale—we found that using means scores enabled a snapshot of the computer use to be developed. We found the mean score for frequency of use in the home was 1.73, suggesting that students had regular use of computers at home. What did surprise us was the relatively high score of computer use in early childhood settings. The original rating for the data set was 1.04, which suggested that students were able to access computers more than ‘sometimes’ in their early childhood settings. This score presented as an anomaly, as our experience (reiterated in the research literature) suggested that the availability and/or use of computers in the centres was not this high. However, when we re-examined the data, we noted a disproportionately high score for one centre—where there had been a high response rate. When this score was removed from the sample, the mean score was significantly lower (mean=0.30). This suggests that there is minimal access to computers in early childhood settings. However, the removal did not alter the other responses in any significant way, suggesting that the data was otherwise reliable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Frequency of access and use of computers</th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-skewed sample</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In presenting this data, it must be noted that many respondents did not respond to the question about the early childhood setting as they did not know what amount of access was available to their children. This may be for a range of reasons beyond the scope of this study, and warrants further investigation. It is possible to hypothesise that the non-response of parents to this question indicates a lack of computers in these centres, and suggests that there is a need for concern about this.

Activities undertaken when using computers

By asking parents to fill in a check-box, we sought to ascertain the types of activities children engage in when using computers. These activities included: playing recreational games; playing educational games; drawing using either programs, drawing tools or open-ended tools such as the mouse; using software packages with nominated purposes; pre-writing activities; copying the behaviour of parents or siblings; using the internet; free play or other purposes. There was also space provided for responses we had not anticipated. This option was not used, suggesting that the survey question identified the main activities undertaken by children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Activities undertaken while using the computer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities undertaken while using computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games – non ed’l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games – ed’l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-writing activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling (copying behaviour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data suggests that young children were accessing computers in a variety of ways that develop a range of computer skills, knowledges and dispositions. It indicates that there is considerable use of computer games and that the use of drawing tools features strongly, with nearly half of the children undertaking this activity. Almost one third of the children use the internet. From the comments provided by parents, it could be seen that, typically, children were using the internet for accessing websites such as The Wiggles’. Such sites have been designed for the young user but still require levels of competence with the mouse and other aspects of the computer. Similarly, many of the games call for mouse skills in order for the user to navigate their way around the games environment. The eye–hand coordination needed for this competence is a very different skill from the traditional eye–hand coordination that has been a feature of early childhood development. The new skill is through a medium where the correspondence between the hand and the action is not direct, whereas traditional modes have been far more direct.
Computer skills of young children

Having identified how young children are accessing computers and for what purposes, we sought to identify the skills they were developing as a consequence of their interactions with computers. The results in Table 5 indicate the parents’ perceptions as to whether their child had developed competent skills in the nominated areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
<th>Use by girls (%)</th>
<th>Use by boys (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turn off/on</td>
<td>25.56</td>
<td>20.37</td>
<td>29.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use mouse</td>
<td>80.45</td>
<td>72.22</td>
<td>87.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find letters and/or numerals</td>
<td>47.37</td>
<td>46.30</td>
<td>48.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type letters</td>
<td>42.11</td>
<td>35.19</td>
<td>47.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrieve files</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>10.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use pull-down menus</td>
<td>12.03</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use drawing tools</td>
<td>30.08</td>
<td>24.07</td>
<td>34.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use touch pad</td>
<td>18.80</td>
<td>18.52</td>
<td>19.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Load CD/DVD</td>
<td>36.84</td>
<td>31.48</td>
<td>41.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save files</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>5.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the tool bar</td>
<td>13.53</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print documents/files/screen</td>
<td>17.29</td>
<td>20.37</td>
<td>15.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type words</td>
<td>16.54</td>
<td>14.81</td>
<td>17.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data suggests that preschool children have developed a high number of skills through their interactions with the computer. That nearly half of the cohort uses the computer for literacy development may indicate the emergence of multiliteracies among young Australians. Many parents reported that their children used the computer for finding/recognising letters, and typing letters and/or words. This may be an interesting development in early literacy skills because, while many young children lack the capacity to properly form the letters of their own and other names, the computer enables them to construct well-formed letters and words without the fear of making mistakes. As reported elsewhere (Zevenbergen, 2007), the keyboard, sizing and print tools enable young children to create their names (and other words, as well as numerical symbols) in a variety of ways not previously possible.

More than 80 per cent of respondents identified that their children had well-developed skills with the mouse. We find this an interesting phenomenon as there is not the direct link between hand and eye movements, as is commonly valued in the early childhood sector.

We also draw attention to the parental reporting that 30.08 per cent of the cohort used the computer for drawing. This finding supports the earlier responses that computers were being used for creative work. Our intention with this survey question was identification of the use of the drawing tools menu where children could use the various options in the pull-down menu. However, we also recognise that many software programs enable children to create freehand drawings by using the mouse, as well as to use various tools, such as moving/organising objects within a space.

Gender differences

When analysing the data, we also separated the cohort by gender. This was not an intention in the original design of the project, as we were not expecting to see too many differences in this early age group. In presenting this data we are aware that it may be as a reflection of gender difference in behaviour as much as about gender perceptions of parents. However, we contend that perceptions are often the reality for many people, so, if parents report a particular phenomenon, the perceived differences can become real differences.

Gender differences in computer usage

Initially, the project sought to identify the ways and degrees to which young children were accessing and using computers. As part of this investigation, parents were asked to indicate if their child/ren used the computer for different activities. These included turning the computer off and on; using the mouse and/or touch pad to allow for the different computers—desktop or laptop—that the children may access; recognising and finding letters and numerals; loading disks; typing letters, words and numerals; saving work; retrieving files; using the tool bar; using pull-down menus; printing work; and using drawing tools. An option for indicating other skills the children may have was included but there were few responses. What could also be seen from the data were quite clear gender differences. In this section we discuss these differences but also draw attention to the general trends in how young children were using computers.

As Table 5 illustrates, parents reported that boys were more frequent users of the computer in all areas except for printing. A similar finding came from the data where parents indicated the types of activities their children undertook while using the computer. These results are displayed in Table 4, where it appears that boys were more likely to use the games—both educational and non-educational—than were girls, and that they were also more likely to use the internet and to play with the computer in a general sense. These differences have been noted in the literature with regard to older students, but this new data suggests that the differences...
between the genders are emerging at a very early age, and that different patterns of computer use may be appearing quite early in children’s development.

**Computer skills by gender: A contradiction**

Table 2 shows the differences between the genders in the access they have to computers. It shows that boys generally have greater access across a range of situations, and that girls are more likely to be in situations where they have no access.

For us, this data is alarming in that it shows that, even as early as four or five years of age, gender differences can be seen to be emerging both in terms of how computers are being accessed and in skill development. However, we reiterate that these may be perceptions of parents as much as gender differences among the children.

**Conclusion**

The data presented in this paper is drawn from a large regional community where there was significant input from a diverse range of settings. It indicates that young children have considerable access to computers in out-of-centre contexts. Most notably, access to computers in the home appears to be very high, with 87.31 per cent of respondents indicating that children have this access. This suggests that many children are coming into early childhood settings with considerable experience of computers.

The data indicates that young children are entering early childhood settings with dispositions that may not have been part of their repertoire of skills in past decades. As such, there would seem to be an imperative for early childhood educators to be cognisant of this and to develop new learning experiences for young children.

As noted in the earlier sections of this paper, this may require considerable input in terms of resources—computer and human. As noted by Downes et al. (2001), the provision of professional development for the uptake of computing technologies will represent a challenge. In part, the fragmented structure of the early childhood sector means that a concerted reform will be quite difficult to implement. Funding such reforms is equally difficult because of the wide range of providers and funding bodies. However, if early childhood educators are to cater for these digital natives, digital experiences need to become part of the everyday practice of centres. Just as the home corner and block corners are an important aspect of the early childhood setting, so too the digital corner may need to be built into the practices. The injection of capital funds into provision of computers with contemporary capacity and programs may need to be built into future planning and budgets.

The data presented in this paper also highlighted emerging gender differences in access to computers and how computers are being used by young children. If these trends are representative of the general population, then it would suggest that the early childhood sector may need to address such differences before they become so substantial as to impact significantly on learning and learning outcomes. Early intervention may arrest any potential differences that could manifest into real differences upon entering school. In making this claim, we draw on the literature provided by Gee (2003) and his games theory as it applies to education.

The data from our survey may be skewed to those families who have computer access in the home. If this is the case, there is a need for early childhood providers to be acutely aware of the differences in the access of families and children to these technologies, which may be creating potential for considerable differences in skill development and very different learning opportunities for children. Computer access in early childhood settings should be improved so as to reduce digital divides among early childhood learners. This would seem to be a priority if some children are not having computer access in the home and not developing the skills and dispositions as has been noted in this study.

**References**


Bullying affects us too: Parental responses to bullying at kindergarten

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Deakin University

Preschool age children are often thought of as too young to be able to engage in bullying behaviours. However, when it does occur, there are ramifications not only for the child but also for parents and siblings. This paper explores this issue by reporting on an exploratory study involving interviews with four parents whose child had experienced bullying in a Victorian kindergarten. Parents reported a range of responses, including anger, guilt for not protecting their child, and powerlessness in the face of denial from kindergarten staff that their child had been bullied. Being unable to access information about bullying among preschool children which might validate their experiences, reinforced the sense of isolation these parents experienced. Further research which explores the needs of family members of children bullied in the kindergarten (prior to school) setting is needed.

Although it is widely acknowledged that bullying is common among older children, preschool children have often been considered too young to have the capacity to form deliberate intentions to harm others, which characterises bullying. Instead, parents, teachers and the wider community have historically reviewed children’s negative interpersonal behaviours as a developmental stage involving rough play and squabbling which they will grow out of. Moreover, by denying the potential for bullying to take place between children of kindergarten age, some education authorities have determined that systematic intervention to prevent or stop bullying at preschools is therefore unnecessary (Main, 1999).

Despite widely-held beliefs to the contrary, some kindergarten students do engage in deliberate, repetitive aggressive behaviours directed towards fellow students in a less powerful situation than the instigator (Rigby, 2002). Furthermore, such behaviour is not a rare or isolated event, with studies indicating that as many as one child in six is subjected to bullying and/or displays bullying behaviour at preschool (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Thus, in a kindergarten class of 20-25 pupils, one might expect on average that as many as three or four may be affected by bullying.

Bullying has long lasting effects on victims and may last long into the victim’s adult life. Recent research has found that the impact of victimisation by peers of very young children is similar to that of older children, and there is no evidence to suggest that young children are more resilient in the face of bullying by other children (Finkelhor, Turner & Ormrod, 2006). Children who have been bullied may be left with a legacy of increased levels of stress, anxiety, illness, depression and suicidal ideas, which may become an obstacle to self-development, learning and effective socialisation (Rigby, 1998). Whether or not children admit they have been bullied, the effects are no less real.

School-age children who are bullied report being unhappy at school (Rigby & Slee, 1991), absenting themselves from school, and having trouble with their school performances (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2000). Moreover, it has been suggested that bullied children have little confidence that teachers will intervene to prevent further bullying, and feel that school is not a safe place to be (Smith & Shu, 2000).

Bullying typically affects not only the individual but also his/her family. It has been proposed that people who have been bullied take on board their frustrations of being victimised and sometimes vent their frustrations on their families (Ambert, 1994). Consequently relationships with
other family members may be affected (Farrington, 1993; Morrison, 2002), although it is unclear how this might occur with preschool-aged children.

Parents are often unaware of the extent of bullying in the lives of their children, and it may take some time for them to become aware of what is going on (Olweus, 1993). First, children do not always talk about being bullied and, second, parents do not necessarily ask children if this is happening to them (Kuczynski, 2004). Parents may consider the potential that their child has been bullied only when they are confronted with a child who has become unhappy at home, moody, withdrawn, verbally lashing out or displaying other uncharacteristic behaviours.

Even when they recognise that their child has been subjected to bullying, parents often have difficulties in advocating for their child. They may feel grief over what has occurred and guilt about not being able to amend it (Solomon et al., 2001). Those parents who approach the kindergarten teacher for insight often find little support, and may even find staff becoming very defensive and denying that bullying was even a possibility (Kuczynski, 2004).

This paper presents findings from a small exploratory study which was undertaken to identify some of the effects on parents of Australian children who have been exposed to bullying at kindergarten.

**Method**

This research, conducted in late 2005, sought to interview parents of children who had experienced bullying by other children at a Victorian kindergarten between 2000 and 2005. This approach is consistent with other research which has interviewed parents when seeking to understand the impact of peer-perpetrated violence on preschool-aged children (Finkelnhor et al., 2006).

In recruiting participants, snowball sampling was used to ensure that a purposive sample of the population group would be utilised. Royse et al. (2001) have proposed that snowball sampling is essential for data collection when the population of interest may be hard to reach, isolated or suspicious of outsiders. In such situations, the best approach is to start with people known to the researcher, gain their trust and ask for names of other people they knew who have been or are in a similar situation. Thus the sample expands and snowballs by tapping into existing social networks (Royse et al., 2001).

The first author had been on the committee of management of a kindergarten in his local area, and through this had become aware of incidents of bullying in local kindergartens and used these contacts to invite potential respondents to participate in this study. As he was known to be a parent of children attending kindergarten, he had credibility with potential respondents. He also had contact with staff in a number of local kindergartens who could pass on an invitation to participate in the study to any parents they knew whose child had been bullied at kindergarten. Participants in the study were also asked if they knew other parents whose child had been bullied at kindergarten, and if so, were provided with an invitation regarding this study which they could give to these persons.

A total of four parents, comprising three mothers and one father, agreed to participate. The participants were aged from 32 to 36 years. Three of the respondents were married and one a single parent. Three of the children exposed to bullying were the first born (two from only-child families) and one was a middle child. The children were all aged four to five years when the bullying occurred.

Parents who agreed to participate in the project were interviewed by the first author in a semi-structured interview of 20 to 30 minutes duration. Five core questions asked of all respondents were:

1. **How would you define bullying?**
2. **How did you come to learn that your child was involved in bullying?**
3. **How did your child’s experience of bullying come to affect you as a parent/guardian?**
4. **How did you support your child and other family members?**
5. **What support or help is needed by parents/guardians when their child is involved in bullying?**

Interviews took place at a location that best suited the needs of the participants, such as a private room in a library or community agency, or in a coffee shop.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Naturalistic data analysis was employed whereby emerging themes were identified and labelled, and exemplars of both were utilised (DePoy & Gilson, 2003). This analysis provided the researchers the opportunity to look for ideas in the data being examined. Thematic analysis was then undertaken as this allows for a gradual move from identifying key issues and common themes, to creating links between them to provide a sense of context and to discuss any contradictions. This approach also overcomes the problem of viewing all items as having equal power (Kellehear, 1993).

**Findings**

At the outset, participants were asked to provide a definition of bullying. The participants’ definitions were similar to those provided in current literature surrounding the issues of school-based bullying. The majority of participants reflected that bullying is the use of power over others in conjunction with physical and/or verbal manipulation. Bullies were viewed as being more powerful than their victim. This power was noted
as being physically stronger, having enhanced verbal expression and the ability to frighten and intimidate, being psychologically manipulative and having the ability to exclude and include. As one parent commented:

* Bullying is a horrible and destructive means of disempowering people. It is a negative power that is too common in our society ... Bullying is when anyone deliberately means to hurt another person on a regular basis. It may be name-calling, hitting, teasing or threatening another person.

The parents had noticed their children being scared and lacking in self-esteem as a result of having been subjected to constant teasing, name-calling or rejection by other children.

Parental fears that their child was being bullied were in most cases confirmed when the children had told their parents about what was happening to them. Some children were able to do this by questioning their parents about name-calling and being hit. Irrespective of whether children were able to articulate experiences of bullying, all of the children informed their parents of something being wrong in other ways. Three children had expressed their experiences by refusing to go to kindergarten and crying before kindergarten. The parents of some children also reported behavioural changes such as bed-wetting and difficulties in bowel motion management.

Most of the participants reported that the kindergarten teachers should be concerned about stopping bullying, and said the kindergarten system needs to acknowledge that young children can and do bully. Participants suggested that staff need to target bullying in more productive ways, such as talking more openly to children about violence and its effects, and never using issues of developmental stages as an excuse for denying the issue of bullying in the kindergarten context.

It was also recommended that kindergartens develop anti-bullying policies and that the teachers themselves should endeavour to stop bullying before and when it happens. Participants also strongly expressed the need for teachers to be trained to identify teasing and bullying and to act to prevent incidents escalating into distressing cases of bullying.

At no stage were any of the participants advised by the kindergartens of any problems their child was experiencing. Rather, parents were left to raise their concerns with the kindergartens, and all of these parents had in fact done so. However, while parents were concerned that the bullying may get worse, they also feared being labelled as over-protective for suggesting that it was affecting their child. In particular, parents were concerned about making no change or making an awful situation worse and causing additional negative consequences.

Participants reported the need for authorities to acknowledge and act on all parental concerns regarding the safety and welfare of their children in relation to bullying. They said one of the greatest supports was for parents to be believed and the issue not denied by the kindergarten system. Parents needed to feel that they could approach the staff in confidence and be provided with support and recognition of the possibility of bullying.

Parents of children who are bullied feel angry, powerless and guilty about their inability to protect their child. As a consequence, some parents had questioned their adequacy to perform the parental role. All of the parents reported higher levels of stress and anxiety. As one parent explained:

* I was sad, angry, hurt and felt I had failed my son. Literally I was broken hearted and felt guilty. Why? I don’t really know, but I felt it was my fault. I’m meant to protect, nurture and love my son, yet I put him in a situation that caused him distress, harm and exposure to bullying.

The participants in this study were not the only family members affected by their child’s experience of bullying, with siblings and the participants’ partners also experiencing stress. Siblings, on becoming exposed to the bullied child’s changed behaviour, began to fear and not want to engage with that child.

The parents in this study reported a range of ways they had sought to support their child. Apart from notifying the kindergarten of their concerns, parents had sought to increase self-esteem, overcome fear and build stronger social skills in their children. The importance of spending time with the child, discussing people’s behaviours and feelings and how to respond in different ways was also suggested.

The majority of participants supported the notion of talking about bullying, including having parents talk to children and other parents about the problem, and getting the issue recognised. It was also reported that parents need to actively provide support to kindergartens and each other in complex situations, and work closely to monitor children and their progress. This may necessitate parents being able to access information about bullying so they can be proactive in their child’s welfare. Information about the types of bullying, ways to work through bullying and the effects of bullying were viewed as vital in understanding the issues.

**Discussion**

This study explored the issues associated with bullying within the Victorian kindergarten system from the perspective of parents whose child had been bullied at kindergarten. While the small sample of just four
parents is an obvious limitation of this research, this paper has highlighted an area that clearly warrants further examination. Future research needs to establish the prevalence of bullying among children attending kindergarten and the impacts of bullying on both the children and other family members. More research is also warranted to further explore each of the five key issues identified by the current study:

- Kindergarten staff being unaware that children are bullied
- A lack of information available regarding bullying
- Parents feeling isolated
- Parents lacking the ability to advocate for their children
- A need for greater family support.

Although parents may expect teachers to know how best to deal with bullying situations, the findings from this study suggest that it may not be the case. In particular, it is of concern that kindergarten staff appeared to be unaware of the bullying until informed by parents, and in some cases actively denied such a proposition. Furthermore, preliminary research by Farrell (1999) indicated that early childhood teachers tend to be hesitant about the labels of ‘bully’ and ‘victim’ and prefer to talk about ‘inappropriate’ or ‘unacceptable’ behaviour.

The isolation of parents who are affected by bullying is exacerbated by the lack of awareness about the issue, the shame attached and the lack of information available. It is suggested that by working collaboratively, kindergartens and families could help each other to acknowledge and disclose bullying without feeling ashamed and responsible for it, and assure parents that they are not alone in the experience. The societal understanding of bullying and its effects is important in promoting prevention and awareness, strengthening social interaction and problem-solving skills, assisting young children to handle conflict, and recognising when someone is resorting to bullying.

Rigby and Johnson (2003) have proposed that a whole kindergarten community approach, one which is proactive and systematic, is needed for kindergartens to deal with bullying behaviours. It should include extensive research into bullying and detailed step-by-step implementation guidelines. Also required are teacher and staff training materials, multimedia programs designed for young children, and parent learning sessions. A whole kindergarten community approach is a program that utilises and supports all members of the kindergarten community—the children, the teachers and the families.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of developing and establishing firm policies in kindergartens to adequately and fairly deal with the bullying problem. It is important to establish an anti-bullying policy that is clearly communicated to all within the kindergarten community. The governing body of Victorian kindergartens ensures that teachers are exposed to documents dealing with social relationships within kindergartens (e.g. Carbone et al., 2004; Department of Human Services, 2007). However, there is little or no mention of bullying intervention programs within these documents. Hence, the Department of Human Services, as the funding body for Victorian kindergartens, should also be urged to develop a widely-supported anti-bullying policy and ensure all kindergartens operate with anti-bullying policies in place, as part of their funding agreements.

Placing a greater emphasis on public discussion of kindergarten bullying, offering support to those affected and exploring the issue of young children who are bullying is clearly an urgent task. This is a challenge for researchers and kindergartens, and also an opportunity to develop more effective ways of decreasing and ultimately eliminating bullying and its negative effects. It is currently unclear which approaches to reducing bullying are likely to be the most effective with kindergarten children, and further research is needed.

References


Early Childhood Australia Doctoral Thesis Award

Early Childhood Australia is currently accepting nominations for its Doctoral Thesis Award from all Australian universities with early childhood doctoral students.

The award was established by Early Childhood Australia in 1995 to:
• encourage Australian early childhood research
• recognise the excellence of early childhood research undertaken by doctoral students in Australia.

The award will comprise:
• a citation delivered with the presentation of the award at the ECA Conference, Canberra, 3 – 6 October 2008
• a return airfare to the 2008 ECA Conference
• the engraving of the awardees name on the perpetual trophy, to be held in the ECA National Office
• an invitation to present the findings of the research at the 2008 ECA National Conference.

NOMINATIONS CLOSE 30 JUNE 2008

Further details, including selection criteria, can be found at www.ecaconference.com.au/Doctoral_Thesis_Award_2008.html

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F: 02 6242 1818
E: awards@earlychildhood.org.au
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au
Concerts for young children

Louie Suthers
Macquarie University

CONCERTS DESIGNED TO INTRODUCE young children to music and live performance are staged by a variety of organisations and ensembles across Australia. Shows featuring a wide range of performers are advertised for young children. Such concerts include Babies’ Proms, Family Concerts by symphony orchestras, Play School Concerts, performances by children’s music groups such as The Wiggles, and performances for children by youth orchestras and choirs. To be successful, these concerts must match the needs and interests of their audience of young children, engage their attention and offer the potential to expand their musical worlds. This paper documents the views of some musicians and early childhood practitioners about concerts for children aged from two to six years. Through interviews and observation of performances, some key principles for staging concerts for young children are proposed. Effective ways of incorporating concert experiences into the early childhood curriculum are also examined.

THE IMAGE OF A SYMPHONY concert is that of a formal occasion: well-dressed patrons in well-appointed venues listening attentively to programs of classical music, applauding when etiquette demands and enjoying a drink with friends at interval—not an environment designed to cater for the needs and interests of young children. In fact, some performances state that children under eight or 10 years will not be admitted.

However, concert-giving organisations across the world acknowledge that today’s children are the potential audiences and consumers of live music performances and recordings in the future. This fact has been recognised for decades by concert organisers who have staged concerts specifically dedicated to schools and young people. On the other hand, performances for young children who have not yet entered formal schooling is a comparatively new undertaking for most organisations, performers and teachers. By definition, concerts for children under seven years of age cannot be the same as those for adults, nor simply shorter versions of performances for high school or primary school students.

This paper explores views about concerts for an early childhood audience from the perspectives of musicians and educators. Further, it offers some guidance for those preparing to attend or present concert performances for young children.

Background

From the early months of life, young children are naturally responsive to music (Andress, 1998; Littleton, 2002; Young & Glover, 1998). However, they do not grow from eager responders to music into enthusiastic adult concert-goers, listeners and consumers of music without opportunities to explore music activities in their playroom and experience live concert performances.

Early childhood services across Australia provide programs that foster creative and aesthetic development using music and movement. This is good practice and required for accreditation; Accreditation Principle 6.6.21 (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2003) for day care centres states that the ‘program includes excursions and/or visitors to the centre for … performances that serve as a stimulus for children’s creativity’ (p.40).

But how is it possible to introduce children to concert experiences? How can performances work for an audience unfamiliar with concert etiquette and repertoire? How do young children who prefer to be moving and active become engaged in the fundamentally passive activity of being a concert audience member?

Previous investigations of concerts for children have focused principally on children’s responses to performance (Suthers, 1993; Suthers & Larkin, 1997; Sydney Symphony Orchestra,
What principles would be useful for performers and educators planning concerts for young children? 

Method

The study employed a qualitative methodology. It sought to collect the opinions and ideas of some key personnel involved in providing concert experiences for young children. Three musicians specialising in giving concerts for children, two early childhood educators and two parents were interviewed. Data was collected using recorded semi-structured interviews (Burns, 1997); respondents were free to discuss or omit any topics they wished. The interviews were intended to allow the respondents to talk about what they considered to be the important aspects of concerts for young children and thus provide insights into the perspectives and views of teachers, performers and parents.

Interview transcripts were shown to the interviewees to allow them to modify or delete anything they wished. The responses of one performer, Brandon, and a day care centre director, Catherine, were selected as the principal focus of this paper. Their interviews yielded the richest and most comprehensive data. (Other respondents did not talk about all aspects of the investigation. Two of the musicians wanted to talk only about the musical content of their performance, and both parents were happy to talk about their own child’s responses and reactions but did not talk about the musical or educational aspects of the performances.) However, data from other respondents is included to illuminate key points. (Pseudonyms are used for all participants.)

The interview data was supplemented by observation of five different performances for children. Three performances were by children’s musical performers at different venues—a community centre, a day care centre and a museum. The other two performances were prom-style concerts for young children at the Sydney Opera House.

Brandon is a professional instrumentalist who, since 1998, has been the composer and arranger for a four-person group specialising in performance for children aged from two to seven years. The group’s website explains that their aim is to ‘introduce children to the diverse world of classical music’. As well as a concert schedule that includes venues around Australia and Asia, the group has also been engaged by symphony orchestras to perform as part of their education programs.

Catherine directs a 50-place day care centre in suburban Sydney. The children enrolled at the centre are aged from four months to five years. The centre provides a range of concert experiences for the children, including performances by professional musicians, parents and older siblings. ‘We like to have a mixture of performances so music is woven into other activities in our program,’ Catherine explained. Recent performers at the centre have included two Aboriginal women who presented Indigenous songs and dances, a brass band from a local primary school, and a singer who used music to focus on important issues such as road safety and child protection.

Results

The responses of performers and educators were compared under the three key headings of concert goals, aspects of the concert experience, and outcomes.

Goals of concerts for children

Musicians and educators shared similar views on goals for concerts. In the words of Charles, a conductor of children’s concerts, ‘Through our concerts we aim to introduce children to the world of live music-making’. Brandon believes that parents and teachers want concert performances for children to ‘have some musical and some sort of educational influence.’ His aim is to make music engaging ‘in a way that isn’t threatening or elitist, but can be accessible to all children’.

Educators also expressed the view that children’s engagement is the key to meaningful performance experiences. ‘Children need to interact with the performers or be inspired by them. Concerts can open their eyes and ears to other experiences of music, other types of music; to something that goes beyond what we can provide during the course of music in our playroom program’ (Catherine).

Parents saw concerts as a positive experience and were keen for their children to attend performances. ‘Olivia [a four-year-old] and her friends were very excited about going to the Opera House. I think, though, at the start of the performance she was quite overwhelmed, especially by how loud the instruments were ... It was an excellent concert for the children and I liked it too,’ reported Sandra, Olivia’s mother.

Aspects of the concert experience

In all concerts, the children in the audience were fascinated by the musicians playing instruments. It was clear that they were particularly responsive to the parts of the concert...
where the musicians left the performing area and interacted directly with them. In some concerts the musicians moved through the audience. At the prom concerts after the more formal concert had concluded, the children were able to go up to performers, talk to them and touch their instruments.

Venue

The children who travelled to a venue outside their centre were excited by their trip and a new location, as well as being stimulated by the concert performance. Excitement was also palpable in children who had performers visit their centre to present a concert. None of the concert performances used a raised stage but, rather, there was a performing or stage area at the front of the space. Seating was mainly prom-style, on the floor, although in all venues there was some additional fixed seating (at the Opera House) or chairs (at other venues) towards the back.

The optimal concert venue was a point of difference between the performers and educators interviewed, yet costing was a critical determinant for both. Chloe, a singer, said that she didn’t mind where her group performed ‘as long as there’s enough space for [the performers] and the children are up close.’ All performers were concerned that no children should be unable to attend their concert because of the ticket price.

Brandon’s group usually performs for audiences of 150 to 200, ‘to keep the cost down’. He explained:

_We only use halls that have no fixed seating. So it’s not a theatre experience. In choosing venues we make sure that the venues are accessible for kids—stroller and pram access … Children need to be up pretty close. We do a lot of our numbers now where we walk among them … even touch the children with the instruments. There are times when we get children to hang on to the instruments, move valves and move slides. We can surround them with music._

Early childhood staff found that their choice of concert venues was influenced by financial constraints, licensing regulations and their program’s educational aims. For some, there were advantages in having performances in their centre rather than travelling to a venue elsewhere. These include the ease of weaving the concert into their program: usual routines could be maintained and the children tended to be more relaxed and settled in familiar surroundings. Organising performances at the centre is also less costly:

_Financially it’s much less expensive. We can’t afford to hire buses … another advantage is that we allow our children who don’t want to be involved in the performance to participate in other activities. (Catherine)_

Repertoire

Musicians and educators were both keen to expand children's musical worlds through live performance. They agreed that the concert program needs to be engaging and varied to capture and maintain the attention of a very young audience. The length of the concert was considered crucial; ‘not too long’ was the consensus. Brandon's group aimed for a 40 minute program and Catherine suggested ‘30 to 45 minutes’ as the ideal concert duration. There was also agreement that individual songs or pieces should not be overly long, about two to four minutes.

Educators, performers and parents were all mindful that young audiences are not passive, and that children need to participate in the concert and interact with performers. Catherine elucidated: ‘Performances must be interactive. Even with the brass band, while there was that standard concert-with-audience format, at the end there was a lot of interaction for the children.’

For Brandon’s group, their repertoire has evolved over the past six years in response to their audiences:

_First we thought we’d present orchestral music in a fun way … then I started writing some original pieces and eventually the original repertoire almost took over. We found that, for each song, we wanted to have the children doing a different activity—jumping, or dancing, or singing, or listening, or clapping. So we found we needed to write songs specifically for those activities … We also use some familiar children’s songs because we want children to sing along … [to] something like ‘Twinkle, twinkle’ … and we still use some standards like ‘Radetsky March’, ‘Hansel dance’ (an adaptation from Humperdinck’s opera); so they’re getting a little bit of a taste of the classics without them being aware of it._

_We want to excite a response in our audiences, not just have children sit and be passive … I love to see kids come and grab the trombone. It’s hard to control it when you’ve got a kid swinging on the end of it. But I think those are the sort of experiences that can last a lifetime. What we want to do is provide an experience where they can see and touch and hear … for as many children as possible._

Early childhood practitioners highlighted the importance of forging links between the concert experience and their learning program to enable children to make connections between playroom experiences and the performance. For example, ‘The most successful concerts we’ve had were performances that featured percussion instruments, because the children could try them and play them themselves’, said Sally, an early childhood teacher. The children’s familiarity with drums and tambourines through their own playroom music-making made it easy for them to relate to the instruments when they saw them used in a performance. They used their own prior experience when they had the opportunity to play the performers’ drums after the concert. Later, staff observed some children incorporating aspects of the drummer’s techniques into their own drum play. Teachers also praised performers who could relate well to young children: talking to them
appropriately and without patronising, involving them in activities and, importantly, being able to settle them down.

Outcomes

Performances can be influential, even defining experiences, for some children. Both educators and performers were aware of the potential significance and impact of concerts. Sally, the teacher, said, ‘We hope that the children will learn something and remember something from a concert.’ Brandon, the musician, explained:

I want young children to realise that music is enjoyable; playing instruments can be fun and listening to music can be fun. And if the experience makes them want to hear another concert, … if our concerts encourage them to want to hear more music, that’s terrific … We’re not going to turn the concert into a lesson … but participating in a concert, in a musical environment, has an educational quality to it.

In the early childhood centre:

We see the influence of the performance when children engage in conversations with each other, how they tell their parents about the performance, and in their drawings … It’s interesting what they remember ... We also see it reflected in their own performances … They have that knowledge of the performance set-up; they are aware of the conventions … It might be an actual performance or it might be incorporated into a play scenario. (Catherine)

Sally also reported the children in her playroom setting up concert scenarios during play episodes: ‘The children particularly seem to enjoy the clapping and bowing aspects of performance in their own play.’

Teachers were mindful of the place of concert follow-up activities, both planned and spontaneous. Support material can assist practitioners to help children recall the performance experience and incorporate elements of the concert into their programs. ‘It can be useful to have both a recording and print material’, suggested Catherine. Brandon’s group has a CD available and is currently developing a booklet of activities related to their concert performances for teachers and parents. Megan, a parent of a three-year-old, noted, ‘James didn’t really join in with anything during the concert, but he sang all the way home in the car. He’s still singing the kangaroo song. I’m going to buy their CD for him.’

Conclusion

While it is not possible to generalise on the basis of this limited investigation, the project does highlight some key issues associated with concert performances for young children. Convinced of the benefits of concerts for children, musicians, educators and parents in this project agreed about many principles for successful performance. These principles state that concerts for young children should be:

- short, probably 30 to 40 minutes duration
- varied in their repertoire
- fast-paced
- full of opportunities for active participation for the children
- presented by a performer who can relate well to their young audience.

It is essential that performers and presenters be able to engage at an appropriate level with young children, as well as excite, manage and inspire them. Opportunities for children to participate in the performance in a variety of ways—such as with actions, clapping, singing or moving—appropriate for their development is vital. Personal interaction with the performers at the end of the concert can provide additional modes of engagement (Suthers & Larkin, 1997). Each song or piece in the program should be quite short, with as many as possible accompanied by participatory activities (Meyers, 2005; Russell, 2006). Long stretches (four minutes or more) where children are expected to sit quietly and listen are likely to make young audiences bored and very restless.

The concert program may present a variety of musical styles, genres or extra-musical messages, and ideally should feature at least one or more items familiar to the children (Meyers, 2005; Thompson, 1996). A well-known song, rhyme or poem is used effectively by some performers for this purpose. Some teachers also chose one piece of music they knew would be included in the program and used it in a variety of playroom activities in preparation for the concert (Suthers, 1993).

Aside from the program and the performers there were other aspects of the concert experience that were important. Cost is a factor that may preclude some children or centres from experiencing concerts. The optimum concert venue—hall or centre—could not be determined during this investigation. However, finding a location which balances financial constraints with adequate space for optimal audience engagement and participation can present problems. Follow-up material—CD, video, DVD, print material—from the performers may also be useful for helping children remember their concert experience and for teachers integrating the concert experience into the regular program.

Practical considerations for planning concert experiences can also impact on the success of concert experiences.

Some considerations for planning concert experiences

The following principles are suggested to assist teachers in maximising the benefits of concert experiences. Parents and performers may also find them helpful in planning.

If you have never taken children to a concert, these suggestions may help you organise and plan for a concert. Prior to the concert, if possible:
Check out the concert venue. Visit the venue before you take the children. Pay particular attention to the seating, sight lines and proximity to performer/s. Other practical considerations include the location of toilets, the number of steps and where the bus can park/drop off/pick up the children. Knowledge of the venue and its facilities can help your visit run smoothly.

Check out the performer/s. Take the opportunity to attend a concert by a performer you are considering. It is much easier to determine the suitability of a performance from the reality of a concert rather than from publicity material or recordings. Observe, in particular, the performers’ interactions with the audience. Can you envisage your children at the performance? How would they respond?

Prepare the children for the concert. If you have been to a performance you’ll have ideas about the kind of activities that will be appropriate. Consider using songs or music from the performance in addition to stories, videos and dramatic play scenarios.

Stage some live concerts in the centre. They provide very different experiences from watching television and DVDs. Start with very short concerts (five to 10 minutes). Some parents or older siblings may be happy to volunteer to perform. This is a good way to involve family members in your centre’s arts program. It also helps the children experience what happens at concerts and practice their role. You may also wish to include some children from the centre who are keen to perform in your centre or playroom concerts.

Brief parents who agree to help by attending concerts. It is important that parents who attend concerts in the centre or at other venues have a clear understanding of what the concert will involve so they can support the children. If they know your expectations they can remind the children. You do not want parent helpers asking the children to sit still when it’s fine for them to be clapping or dancing.

After the concert, if possible:

Integrate the concert experience into your program. Follow-up, both planned and spontaneous, is important in allowing the children to relive their concert experience. Making links with other learning both before and after the concert is also valuable.

Parents and staff members who know the children will observe specific aspects of the performances that will engage, appeal and enchant individual children. These aspects can provide a focus for playroom activities and maximise the impact of the concert experience.

Musicians and educators in this study agreed that live concert performances have the potential to expand the musical horizons of young children by exposing them to new worlds of sounds, music and response. As the great conductor Leonard Bernstein stated, ‘There is nothing that young people don’t want to learn, or can’t understand’ (Bernstein & Gottlieb, 2005, p.75), if it is presented appropriately. For some children, the new sound worlds of live performance may unlock a host of possibilities for future learning and development about music and themselves. When the opportunity next arises, share a concert experience with young children. Help to open their ears and eyes to the many possibilities of live concert performance.

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End Note: Increasingly, early childhood services are using computer and web technologies. The internet can provide useful, current information about concerts, performers and venues. One website used in writing this paper was Little Maestros (http://www.littlemaestros.com.au/, retrieved 22 November 2004). In the future, the internet will be used more and more for making bookings for children’s concerts. This will become as commonplace as online bookings for performances and events for adult audiences are now. Websites can become out-of-date if not regularly updated; so it may be worth double-checking information if you are organising a visit to a concert for young children.
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WE BELIEVE THAT THE Australian early childhood sector is not performing well. The incidence of poor outcomes for children is increasing, and we believe that current service delivery is not capable of addressing this. We argue that, as a sector, there is an abundance of evidence of the kinds of programs and initiatives that could address our national concerns, and review some of that evidence. We also point out that there is considerable knowledge in Australia, based on Australian programmes and experience, that can be used to build a different early childhood sector with the potential to significantly impact on growing disadvantage. We conclude with the principles or themes around which such initiatives should be developed and a call to advocate for the development of such services. Appropriate services supporting all of our young children, their families and their communities, have the potential to make a huge impact on our society, and we can no longer hide from our responsibilities and avoid providing such services.

We are not doing well

EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES in Australia are fragmented and operate from a range of jurisdictions (Press & Hayes, 2001). Some children attend out-of-home services such as child care. These children tend to be children of parents who are either in employment or who are preparing for employment through education and/or training. Other children (from three–five years) attend kindergartens or preschools. These may be sessional or part-time, and at least one parent of each of the children attending these services may not be in employment. Another type of service available to young children with at least one parent not in employment is playgroups. In some areas there may be family support services available to enhance the quality of parenting and consequently support improvements in child outcomes. Generally, these services tend to operate in areas targeted as at-risk or be specifically directed towards those families identified as at-risk.

There is increasing concern about escalating poor outcomes for children across the developed world, and it appears outcomes for Australian children are no better. ... in spite of increasing economic prosperity and ‘globalisation’ enabling greater access to opportunities, many key indicators of the health, development and wellbeing of their children and youth are not improving and many are worsening. And the social gradients (we call them inequalities)—the differences in outcomes between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups in the population—are actually growing larger, not smaller as promised (Stanley, Prior & Richardson, 2005, p. 2).

Clearly, current systems are not effective; we need to rethink what is offered to children and their families. Neurobiological research (Mustard, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) indicates that the most effective changes arise from interventions in the early years. Economic analyses support this. For example, Heckman (2006) suggests that we can obtain an eight-fold return on our investment for interventions in the early years compared to a three-fold return on investments in the school years. Therefore it would be timely to critically analyse the services we offer in the early years, especially if we wish to improve outcomes for children, their families and our society.

We do not believe we can effect the magnitude of change we need in outcomes by trying to improve a flawed system. Tinkering with qualifications, with
standards of accreditation and with funding to enable us to improve what we already do will not make sufficient change to impact significantly on our future as a nation. We need to rethink the services we offer, we need to recommit to improving the lives of all Australian young children and their families, and we need to advocate for the resources to make the substantial changes required.

We do not need to think about these changes in a vacuum. There is ample evidence from research overseas about the sorts of programs and initiatives that work. There is also ample evidence from within our own country about the kinds of things we can do to make a difference. In this paper we present this evidence as well as our own vision of a possible future for early childhood in Australia.

The international evidence

The international evidence is compelling. People such as Fraser Mustard have played a significant role in presenting that evidence. The original McCain and Mustard report (1999) was responsible for providing evidence regarding the importance of the early years which helped shape the direction of Canadian government policy over successive years. The recent release of their second report (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007) provides a summary of the research evidence from those years. Early childhood services in Canada under the leadership of Fraser Mustard have developed an integrated approach typified by early childhood and parenting centres. A range of services is offered in these centres, aimed at a holistic approach in working with local children and families. Early childhood and parenting centres typically offer opportunities for children to engage in problem-based play. These opportunities can be offered in full-year full-day care programs. Alternatively, children can attend sessional or part-time programs or playgroups. Care may be casual or regular, and respite options are also available.

Parent-support components of the program begin during pregnancy. Birthing classes and information on pregnancy and child development are offered in a range of ways to meet the needs of local families. Information continues to be available to parents as their child grows, following a ‘just in time’ approach (McCain et al., 2007, p.134). This ensures that parents get the support they need when they need it and are not overwhelmed by information at other times. Supports range from formal to informal, from individual to group, and from centre-based to in-home. The focus is on building trusting relationships between parents and centre staff in order to tailor services to best meet families’ needs. Part of the package includes nutritional information and supplements for pregnant women and families with young children. Centres provide opportunities for parents to learn how to create nutritious meals, and food can be taken home when it is required. Services offered through the centres are available to all families and are optional and affordable. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that services are inclusive, meeting the needs of families from diverse backgrounds and with a range of different needs.

Alongside these developments in mainstream early childhood services in Canada are parallel developments in early childhood indigenous services. As in Australia, indigenous children in Canada were forcibly separated from their families and communities, with similar long-term negative consequences. Indigenous-specific early childhood programs were first offered on reserves but were later expanded to indigenous families living in urban areas. These services offer a holistic approach to service delivery, assisting families through parent education and support as well as early childhood education and training. A unique feature of the First Nations initiatives was the involvement of community members, elders especially, in the generative curriculum—a curriculum development process that valued and actively sought indigenous ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge (Assembly of First Nations, 2005; Ball, 2006; Ball & Pence, 2001; Prochner, 2004). McCain, Mustard and Shanker (2007, p. 125) argue that mainstream services can learn a lot from the hub model used in Canadian indigenous services. They point out that integrated services such as these are no more expensive to run than separate services, and the outcomes for children, families and communities are much improved.

In other countries, integrated services are also found to result in more positive outcomes, particularly when there is a link between the early childhood services provided and community development initiatives (Sheikh & Afzal, 2003). As far back as the 1990s, Myers (1992) reports on a range of programs where community development efforts focused on working with young children and their mothers. In India, for example, provision of additional food, monitoring of child health and preschool for young children, and support and education for mothers were found to result in a decrease in child mortality and better child school performance at minimal cost to the government.

Australian experience

This concept of integrated early childhood services is beginning to be implemented in Australia. The Council of Australian Governments has highlighted early childhood services in its Human capital agenda, one
of the three key planks of the New National Reform Agenda Policy Framework (2007). Arising out of this, a number of Australian jurisdictions have identified the concept of an early childhood centre operating as a hub as an important strategy in working towards these national goals. In the hub model other services, like spokes in a wheel, offer their own unique support, connected through the central childcare core. For example, in South Australia five Learning Together Centres offer families the opportunity to receive home visits, to participate in a literacy program and to attend facilitated playgroups (see http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/families/pages/familsupport/24513/). The Queensland Child Care Strategic Plan 2000–2005 introduces the concept of a childcare and family support hub.

As well as child care, hubs offer a range of other services relevant to family needs. These may include child health programs, family support and parent education (see http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childcare/hub/). Victoria has 40 new children’s centres planned over the next four years that will combine kindergarten, child care and child health services, co-located with schools (Council of Australian Governments, 2007). The Australian Capital Territory also has child and family centre hubs—these combine child and maternal health, early childhood education, social workers and psychologists. The child and family centre is the ‘flagship’ of Building our community–The Canberra Social Plan (ACT Government, 2004).

In the 1980s and at the beginning of 1990s, a range of mainstream multifunctional, community-based childcare services was developed, but many of these no longer operate. The new hub model, another incarnation of these services, has been followed for a number of years in Indigenous services in Australia. The MACS (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Service) have traditionally offered a range of services to the families using them and the communities where they are based. The first MACS was established in 1987 by the Department of Family and Community and was, from the very beginning, specifically designed to meet the needs of local Aboriginal children and families through offering a range of services including child care (long day care, occasional care, outside-school-hours care and vacation care), playgroups, and parent support.

MACS still provide this range of services, offering a holistic service to children and families based on strong cultural philosophy and practice. Knowledge of the ranges of successful Indigenous children’s services programs is limited and much of the information is available only through word of mouth. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC, 2004) published a review of a range of different programs ranging from playgroups to MACS in order to address this shortfall. The MACS are widely recognised by Indigenous communities as essential to their wellbeing, and the recent federal budget recognises this in its allocation of funding for new Indigenous services. The Australian Labor Party paper (Rudd, Roxon, Macklin & Smith, 2007) proposes these initiatives can be taken further by developing Parent-Child centres, offering home visiting as well as a range of other initiatives such as literacy programs and comprehensive mothers’ and babies’ services.

From our reading of the literature (for example, Fasoli et al., 2004; Priest, 2005; SNAICC, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c) it appears that successful Indigenous child care has in common a set of underlying principles. Exploring these principles in action offers knowledge upon which those of us working in mainstream child care can reflect. Indigenous children need services that support a strong cultural identity to enable them to move into the schooling system and experience success. Services need to be accessible to and reflect the needs of local communities, families and children. This means that services in different communities will look quite different; one size does not fit all.

In 2002 the Jalaris Aboriginal Corporation received income from the Stronger Families Fund to address the high rate of alcoholism, drug problems, inadequate nutrition, domestic violence and suicide in Derby, Western Australia (SNAICC, 2005b). A drop-in centre for young mothers and their children, from birth to 12 years was initially set up, employing family support workers and trainees. Demand quickly outstripped resources and there was concern that parents were using the centre as free child-minding and not engaging in the programs offered, so the project refocused on health, nutrition and parent education. Argyle Diamonds and Western Metals Corporation have funded a Nutrition and Health Caravan to reach out to families. Child health nurses operate from the centre and child care is provided on these days, as well as transport to and from the centre. Family support workers, with particular expertise in nutrition and health, also work with people who have problems with parenting. Vacation care programs link Indigenous children with local elders in bush programs.

In contrast, the Minya Bunhii Children’s Centre offers a combined child care and preschool service in Ceduna, South Australia (SNAICC, 2005b). A bus collects all the children in the morning and they stay at the centre for lunch. Those enrolled in the childcare program remain for the rest of the day, while those in the preschool program are dropped home after lunch. A local language and Aboriginal English are used
at the centre, and families are extensively involved in cultural activities operating out of the service. The management committee are all local people. The director of the service undertakes at least one home visit a year to each family, and parents are linked with the Early Learning Program based at the local preschool, which offers more extensive home visiting.

The evidence indicates that services need to be holistic, addressing a range of needs including health and wellbeing, education, employment and training, housing, social security and cultural heritage. Sims (1997, 2002) identifies this as an ecological approach, but Karp (1996) coined the term ‘wrap-around’ services to reflect this holistic approach. SNAICC (2004) provide examples of successful small services such as Knyitti Jundu Playgroup which has been operating in Mackay, Queensland for a number of years. These playgroups were started by the Aboriginal Health Worker from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Community Health Service. Children attend with their parent or carer, who are able to observe appropriate play, learning and health opportunities provided for their children. Workers at the playgroup are sufficiently skilled to offer family support and education for the parents/carers, including regular health monitoring and advice.

Birrelee MACS operates as a childcare centre in Tamworth and is licensed for 39 places (SNAICC, 2005b). The centre provides transport to ensure children can attend. A registered early childhood nurse with midwifery and childcare experience works in the centre and is available to families to provide support and advice. Morning and afternoon teas and lunch are provided for all children, and breakfast to those identified as needing this additional service. A number of the children at the centre are identified as having additional support needs because of disability, behaviour, developmental delays or health problems. SNAICC attribute the success of the centre to the range of programs available.

Fasoli and colleagues (Fasoli, 2004) argue that successful Indigenous services use practices for working with children, families and communities that are not found in mainstream services. They state that the most effective carers are those who are embedded in the community, many of whom are related to each other and to community members. Establishing trust between carers and community members is, in their opinion, more important than formal training. However, it is important that services operate from a physical location that is seen as culturally appropriate. Indigenous staff are more likely to be able to embed their service in local culture and language, ensuring that community members may feel comfortable in the service and trust the carers. Successful programs are also more likely to have different staff responsible for different aspects of the varying programs, rather than requiring all staff to be generalists.

Basic community development principles posit that a necessary strategy to embed services in local communities is to ensure that community members have input into service governance (Ife, 1995). Successful community governance does not happen automatically; it requires ongoing support and training and a commitment of resources. While Indigenous services should be governed in the main by local Indigenous people, it is appropriate to call in specialist skills and knowledge where needed. In the same way, it is appropriate to call in expertise from outside the community when this is needed to facilitate governance.

A significant component of successful governance is accountability. It is important that services are able to demonstrate the quality of their operations in a manner that is sufficiently flexible to allow for local needs. Best practice principles, for example, must allow for cultural and local differences in values and practices.

Where to now?

Australia is only beginning to recognise the importance of embedding services for young children into holistic community capacity-building programs. In developed society in particular, parents of young children are effectively isolated, expected to undertake their child-rearing responsibilities alone with very little support. The erosion of what little extended family and community support was once offered in Western culture has meant that many Australian children are growing up in a world that is ‘socially toxic’ (Garbarino, 1999). As a society we need to make a commitment to young children and their families. To make this commitment, we must invest in the development of integrated hub-based services.

The development of effective services will occur if we provide resources enabling us to reach into the communities and homes of our young families and offer ‘just in time’ support in ways that enhance parental capacity and not undermine it. We need to ensure that staff in these services have a range of skills to work with children, families and communities, and the skill to network with other professionals to create a team. We need to ensure that funding and governance bodies recognise the importance of providing holistic services that integrate children and families in their communities and do not separate them from the world around them. And most of all
we need to change the attitudes of those who believe that young children are not important, and that therefore services to support them, their families and communities are an indulgent luxury provided only to those who have clearly failed in a task that should come naturally to parents. Appropriate services supporting all our young children, their families and their communities have the potential to make a huge impact on our society, and we can no longer hide from our responsibilities and avoid providing such services.

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