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Exploring transition through biographical memory: Considerations for parents and teachers in early childhood education

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THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ARENA is receiving intense political attention in Australia as we attempt to create policies that reflect international understandings about the importance of the early years. Early childhood practitioners are on the receiving end of new curricula, guidelines and standards that influence how they work with children, families, communities and each other. It is a time of change; a time when the early childhood profession is positioned to gain credibility and status. It is a time when new ideas and new ways of thinking are challenging existing practice. Early Childhood Australia has been a voice for children since 1938 and continues to be a voice both for children and for early childhood practitioners. As the longest running major early childhood journal in Australasia, the Australian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC) plays a significant role in this, creating space for debates about key early childhood issues and offering cutting-edge research in early childhood.

In this issue, we have taken the opportunity offered to us through modern technology to increase the number of articles published. We recognise the importance of hearing the voices of leading academics and practitioners in early childhood around the world and aim to improve their ability to make their ideas and their work available publicly. From now on, we will publish articles in hard copy with an annex of articles online. All are peer reviewed and judged to be high-quality articles. Our bumper edition celebrates both the eminence of early childhood in the Australasian political arena and the knowledge and skills of academics around the world who are contributing to the Australasian early childhood scene.

In this time of rapid change, where numerous curriculum documents are being made available to early childhood professionals, it can be difficult for practitioners to understand and implement each one effectively. Burgess, Robertson and Patterson worked with practitioners to identify the decision-making process that leads them to engage or not engage with such initiatives. They found that a considerable proportion (39 per cent) of their participants initially reacted negatively to these initiatives, particularly when they felt their workload would increase as a consequence of engagement. The more they were exposed to additional initiatives, the less likely they were to engage. The fact that our understandings of high-quality early childhood initiatives are, themselves, contested, creates a challenge for early childhood practitioners.

Logan and Sumson argue that we need to create space for debates on quality. As a profession, we do not all share common understandings, and the measurement tools (such as the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System—QIAS) do not emphasise a number of the less tangible perceptions of quality held by practitioners.

One of the key components of new early childhood standards is qualifications and there is an underpinning rationale arguing that improved qualifications lead to improved quality of service delivery. In my paper I, however, argue that this is somewhat dependent on the content of the training and that it is important that we reflect on what we want early childhood practitioners of the future to do, in order to develop the training that will prepare them for these new roles. Certainly it is clear that early childhood practitioners will need the skills to deliver culturally competent services. Guilfoyle, Saggars, Sims and Hutchins discuss what this means from their research with Indigenous communities. Practitioners also need to work effectively with families. Early childhood practitioners are in an ideal position to offer family/parent support as discussed by Rolfe and Armstrong. In some cases, parent support may reach out from a centre-based program. For example, Aylward, Murphy, Colmer and O’Neill discuss a parent intervention based around attachment theory and the circle of attachment available to families identified as ‘at risk’. Social and emotional wellbeing is also an important component of high-quality early childhood programs. Davis and colleagues discuss their work in determining early childhood professionals’ understanding of social and emotional wellbeing and how this can be promoted. Early childhood programs influence not only social and emotional wellbeing but are also shown to influence children’s eating habits in their home. Tysoe and Wilson show that children attending centres that operate the ‘Start Right Eat Right’ program are likely to eat more healthy foods in their homes than children attending centres not operating the program.

High-quality early childhood services are inclusive, meeting the diverse needs of the children and families in the communities they serve. Wong and Cumming discuss inclusive family day care practice, and highlight the importance of attitudes in successful inclusion. A philosophy of children’s rights, previous positive experience in inclusion, and availability of resources and support create a positive climate where family day care workers feel they can operate an inclusive program. Inclusive practice means that all children have a right to learn and that practitioners offer learning opportunities most suited to each child. This is exemplified in Bielas and Boon’s article where a self-monitoring process was successfully used in an inclusive classroom to help children with disabilities modify their behaviour and improve compliance.

High-quality early childhood programs manage children’s transitions effectively. Transitions can be stressful for
children. Rosewarne, Hard, White and Wright remind us of the emotional impact of transitions, where it is common to move from feelings of competency in the familiar environment to feelings of fear and uncertainty in the new environment. Mirkhil shows that children often do not fully understand the implications of transitioning from early childhood services to school. They think of school as a place where they can continue to play with friends and do not take account of the academic nature of school. Early childhood picture books do not necessarily help children with this transition. Dockett, Perry and Whitton argue that the images of teachers found in many picture books position teachers as mainly white Anglo-Celtic females who are the keepers of knowledge. Transitions are complicated when children and families come from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds.

Leadership is an essential element in supporting services to reflect on current practices, to implement new curricula and standards, and to continually improve quality. Certainly there is strong evidence that higher quality services are likely to have more effective leaders. Brownlee, Nailon and Tickle discuss the role of transformational leadership in early childhood and argues that there is a relationship between core epistemological beliefs and beliefs about leadership practices that can be used to develop leadership training in early childhood.

Art education is addressed in two articles in this issue. Gur and Temel look at an art education program offered to gifted children in Turkey and find it particularly effective in enhancing the children's art skills. They point out that the regular art curriculum is not meeting children's art learning needs and this is a concern. One way of addressing this could be ArtPlay, a community initiative discussed by Brown, Andersen and Weatherald. This initiative involves children as co-learners and co-artists and is successful in offering a diverse range of ways of learning 'art'.

One of the key tenets of early childhood pedagogy is learning through play and Mawson investigates children's different leadership styles in initiating and maintaining play. Play dictators tended to be male, autocratic and less likely to engage in conflict resolution. Play directors tended to be female, democratic and more likely to compromise. In long day care settings where children played together all day, boys were more likely to play in mixed-gender groups than in sessional kindergartens. Participation in mixed-gender groups offered boys opportunities to be exposed to different play styles.

Margaret Sims
University of New England
Introduction

In this paper, we report on a study that examined carers’ and coordination staff’s perceptions of facilitators and barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities in family day care (FDC) settings, in 12 FDC schemes in New South Wales (NSW). We begin by defining the term inclusion and providing a review of literature that discusses inclusion in early childhood settings, with a focus on research that has examined inclusion in FDC. Next, because the way FDC is provided, resourced, monitored and supported differs across the world, we describe the way FDC operates in the NSW context and the support that is available for carers and FDC coordination staff through the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP), an Australian Government-funded program. We then outline the rationale for our study and describe the methods we used before presenting and discussing our findings.

Definitions of inclusion

The term inclusion (as understood in education and care settings) is a concept with multiple, and contested, meanings. The philosophies that inform what is known as inclusion today originated in the disability rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Bailey, McWilliam, Buyse & Wesley, 1998). This movement advocated for (among other things) the moral and legal rights of people with a disability to participate in the range of everyday activities that any other person would expect to experience. This included children with disabilities having the right to access high-quality education and care programs, alongside typically developing children (Bailey et al., 1998)—generally referred to as mainstreaming or integration.

In the early 1990s, the concept of inclusion emerged, and is now typically understood to refer to the rights of children with disabilities to access, participate and be equally included, alongside their peers, in shared education and care settings, as well as having access to broader community membership (Bailey et al., 1998; Beckman et al., 1998; Guralnick, 2001; Odom & Diamond, 1998).

A second, broader meaning of inclusion that has emerged recently is the concept of social inclusion (Freiler & Zarnke, 2002). Social inclusion suggests that all children and adults have the right to participate, and be valued and respected as contributing members of society. Further to this, such action needs to be proactively facilitated by all in the community (Bailey et al., 1998; Freiler & Zarnke, 2002; Guralnick, 2001). While we recognise and acknowledge the importance of ‘social inclusion’, in this paper, we use the term ‘inclusion’ specifically to refer to the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood mainstream settings.
Research and evaluation examining inclusion

The rationale for inclusion suggests that it provides children with disabilities with: more challenging learning settings; the chance to watch, learn from and interact with more competent peers; and a more responsive and open-ended environment, than in specialist education settings (Bailey et al., 1998; Odom & Diamond, 1998). Empirical research exploring the benefits of including children with disabilities in education and care settings has found strong support for full inclusion for the preschool-age population (Bailey et al., 1998). Benefits are most marked in the domains of social competence, play and peer engagement (Buysse & Bailey 1993; Guralnick, Connor, Hammond, Gottman & Kinnish, 1996). Research evidence also supports the proposition that typically developing children gain from the inclusion of children with disabilities. For instance, they demonstrate a high degree of accepting attitudes towards human diversity and the range of human needs (Odom & Diamond, 1998; Peck, Carlson & Helmstetter, 1992). Increasingly, inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream rather than specialised early childhood settings is considered to be both in their best interest and their right.

Much of the research that has examined inclusion in early childhood has focused on centre-based settings (Buell, Gamel-McCormick & Hallam, 1999; Buysse, Wesley & Keyes, 1998; Dinnebeil, Mcnerney, Fox & Juchartz-Pendry, 1998; Epstein-Frisch, 2000; Mulvihill, Shearer & Van Horn, 2002; Odom & Diamond, 1998; Wills & Jackson, 2000). There are, however, many thousands of children who experience a different form of early childhood setting—FDC.

Family day care differs significantly from centre-based care, especially in terms of the care environment, group dynamics, the number of carers and the degree of oversight by an auspicing body. Despite the number of children experiencing FDC, research into this form of child care is limited in Australia. The following discussion synthesises the limited research in support of inclusion in FDC and its potential benefits for children with disabilities.

Inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC

The child with a disability, their family, other children and carers can all benefit from inclusive practices within FDC. Family day care offers families a home-like environment for the education and care of their children (Buell et al., 1999), with a small, mixed-age, family grouping and one regular carer and the development of ongoing relationships between all concerned. Family day care carers become intimately familiar with the children in their care and their families (Wayne, 2006). This intimacy has the potential to assist carers to create care environments that are highly individualised and responsive to each child’s unique strengths and needs (Saunders, Long & Morris, no date; Wayne, 2006). For these reasons, FDC can be especially valuable for children who have a disability. Moreover, the close relationships that customarily develop between FDC carers and families may be of particular benefit for supporting families who are facing additional challenges.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC also has potential benefits for their typically developing peers with whom they share a care environment. For instance, the additional skills that carers gain in caring for children with disabilities can be transferred to the care of other children and thus ‘enriches everyone’ (Saunders et al., no date). Also, sharing a care environment with ‘others’ who are different, assists children to accept and appreciate the range of human diversity (Saunders et al., no date). Last, but not least, caring for children with disabilities can have positive outcomes for carers, including feelings of increased confidence and self-esteem (Saunders et al., no date).

Several studies that have examined inclusion in FDC in the United States of America (USA) (Buell et al., 1999; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Dinnebeil et al., 1998; Wayne 2006) have focused largely on the carers. Collectively these studies have found factors that inhibit and support carers to be inclusive in FDC. Inhibiting factors include carers’: lack of knowledge; lack of confidence; low levels of enjoyment working with children with disabilities and/or their parents; unwillingness to work with certain types of disabilities (disabilities mentioned included motor impairments, severe health impairments, behaviour disorders, ‘mental retardation’, sensory impairments, and children who are not toilet trained); concerns with additional costs associated with caring for children with disabilities; concerns that caring for a child with a disability will reduce their capacity to care for multiple children and result in a loss of income; and negative beliefs about the appropriateness of FDC for children with disabilities (Buell et al., 1999; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Dinnebeil et al., 1998; Wayne 2006).

Factors identified as supporting carers to include children with disabilities in FDC were: knowledge and understanding about disabilities; technical assistance; lending libraries; in-service training; and previous experience of caring for a child with a disability (Buell et al., 1999; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Dinnebeil et al., 1998; Wayne, 2006). Importantly, carers’ individual philosophies about inclusion were found to have a profound effect on their willingness to care for children with disabilities (Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Wayne, 2006). Perhaps this is because, unlike centre-based carers who rely on service mission statements and philosophies to guide their practice, FDC carers have to make these decisions based on their personal beliefs and experiences.

Devore and Hanley-Maxwell (2000) and Wayne (2006) also found that carers’ experience of having a family member with a disability, and having close relationships with the child and/or parents before a disability was diagnosed, played an important role in carers’ decisions to care for children with disabilities. Other factors identified by Devore
and Hanley-Maxwell (2000) that influenced carers’ decision to include children with disabilities or not, included: their judgments about the suitability of the care environment, both for the individual child and the ‘other’ children in care; the physical layout of the space; the group dynamics; and carers’ stamina.

The provision of FDC varies across the globe, making it difficult to generalise findings from the studies outlined above to other contexts. In particular, unlike FDC carers in the USA, in NSW carers are supported at the local level by FDC schemes with qualified early childhood staff. Further, the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC is specifically supported by Inclusion Support Agencies, part of the Australian Government’s Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP). In the next section, we briefly outline how FDC is organised in Australia and the support available to carers within FDC schemes.

**FDC in NSW**

FDC began in Australia as an Australian Government-subsidised children’s service in 1975 (Bullen, 1996). In 2006, there were over 305 FDC schemes in Australia, over 101 of which were in NSW (OECECC, 2006). In NSW, a FDC scheme consists of a network of carers, who care for up to five children under school age, and an additional two school-aged children up to age 12 (making seven children in total) in their own home, overseen and supported by a coordination unit. The coordination unit is responsible for placing children, recruiting carers and ensuring carers meet licensing and quality standards, as well as providing training, resources and services, such as toy libraries, playgroups and home visits. FDC schemes are often organised and financially supported by a sponsoring body, usually a non-profit organisation or a local council.

Schemes vary enormously in terms of size, catering for fewer than 50 children in some areas, to over 700 in others (Bullen, 1996). The 2006 Australian Government Census of Child Care Services (OECECC, 2006) mentions there were 28,581 children in FDC in NSW; 598 (two per cent) of these children were identified as having a disability.

Despite its long history in Australia, and the fact that many thousands of children have been, and continue to be, cared for in FDC, minimal research has been conducted into FDC in this country.

**Inclusion Support Agencies and FDC**

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cwlth) 2 (2) (22), and Disability Standards for Education 2005, make it unlawful for education providers to discriminate against people with a disability, although this is no guarantee that access is equitably applied (Epstein-Frisch, 2000; Wills & Jackson, 2000).

One way Australian FDC schemes are supported to be inclusive is through the work of Inclusion Support Agencies (ISAs). Inclusion Support Agencies are part of the Australian Government’s Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP), introduced in 2006. The role of ISAs is to assist eligible childcare services (including FDC) to improve their capacity to include children from four priority groups\(^1\), one of which is children with ongoing high support needs (for example, disabilities), in a high-quality childcare environment.

Inclusion Support Agencies, through Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs) can offer a range of supports to FDC schemes. For instance, ISFs can visit FDC schemes and/or the carers’ homes to assist coordination unit staff and/or carers identify their goals, strategies and needs relating to including children from the four priority groups in their care. In some cases, where carers are caring for children with eligible ongoing high support needs, they may also be entitled to an Inclusion Support Subsidy. This is a payment given to carers in recognition of the additional work required to include a child with ongoing high support needs. Depending on the level of a child’s ‘needs’, it may also compensate them for taking fewer children in order to effectively include children with ongoing high support needs.

Inclusion Support Agencies have an important role to play in supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC in Australia. However, there is little written about inclusion in FDC in the Australian context, or evidence of how best to support this inclusion, on which ISAs can draw to guide their practice. Here we report on a study that sought to gather evidence concerning factors that inhibit or support the inclusion of children who have a disability in FDC schemes in Sydney.

**The study**

**Context and purpose**

SDN Children’s Services, the site within which this study was undertaken, is a not-for-profit early childhood organisation based in Sydney, NSW. SDN has three ISAs all located in the Sydney metropolitan region—SDN Cumberland Blacktown, SDN Inner Sydney and SDN Northern Sydney. Together they support over 1100 children’s services, of which 17 are FDC schemes. The three ISA area managers identified that, compared to other service types, few ‘requests for support’ had been received by the ISAs from FDC schemes, and few carers were receiving the Inclusion Support Subsidy.

We knew from the 2004 Census of Child Care Services (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005),

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\(^1\) Children with ongoing high support needs, and/or from culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or refugee backgrounds.
that of the 28,933 children in NSW accessing FDC in the year 2004, 820 (three per cent) were identified as having a disability. Extrapolating this rate of three per cent to the number of children in FDC schemes in the Cumberland/Blacktown region \( n = 1294 \), we would expect to find 39 children with a disability. Yet in the five FDC schemes in Cumberland/Blacktown region, only one child was accessing the Inclusion Support Subsidy. The situation was similar in the other two SDN ISAs. This finding was particularly troubling because it was probable that there were carers with children with disabilities missing out, not only on this financial support, but also on the other support the ISA could provide.

With little literature available on which to draw, several managers, staff and one of the researchers—all of whom had had extensive experience with FDC—brainstormed possible reasons for why there might be few requests for support from FDC coordination unit staff and/or carers. We identified several possible reasons:

- FDC schemes were unaware of the support offered by the ISA
- children’s disabilities were not being identified in FDC
- parents of children with disabilities were simply not choosing FDC as an education and care option
- children with disabilities were being excluded from FDC.

Given the important role that FDC schemes play in supporting FDC carers in NSW, in order to obtain a holistic picture, it was important to conduct this study with both carers and coordination unit staff. Unfortunately, however, because of the limitations of our resources, we were unable to investigate parents’ choices as part of this project. Therefore, the research questions that drove the investigation were:

**RQ1**: Are FDC scheme coordination staff and carers in the three SDN ISA regions aware of the ISA and the role of the ISF?

**RQ2**: To what extent are children with disabilities accessing FDC schemes in these regions?

**RQ3**: What factors support and inhibit the inclusion of children with ongoing high support needs in FDC?

**RQ4**: What support can SDN ISA provide to increase the capacity of FDC schemes to include children with ongoing high support needs?

### Method

Our aim when designing the study was to work collaboratively with SDN ISFs and FDC scheme coordination staff to plan a project that would be adapted to each scheme’s unique circumstances, and to gather information in ways that were least disruptive to their service delivery. After approval of our proposal by SDN’s Research Ethics Committee, the project was conducted in several stages, and data was collected using mixed methods, as detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Stages of family day care (FDC) project**

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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<td>Stage three</td>
<td>Coordination unit staff interview</td>
<td>12 schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(12 coordinators, 27 Child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development Officers (CDOs))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage four</td>
<td>Carer interview</td>
<td>9 schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. explain the project</td>
<td>54 carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. gauge interest in participating</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. seek guidance on the most</td>
<td>interview—3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>appropriate ways to gather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>information from carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. gain initial consent for the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>study (consent was later gained</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from all participants).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage five</td>
<td>Initial analysis of findings and</td>
<td>2 researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reflection on project</td>
<td>5 Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. explain the project</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. gauge interest in participating</td>
<td>Facilitators (ISFs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. carers’ and coordination unit staff’s awareness of the ISA and understanding of its role
3. carers’ and staff’s experiences of caring for, or supporting the inclusion of, children with disabilities
4. ways that the ISA could increase their capacity to be inclusive (see Appendix 1: Carer postal survey—as an example).

Notes from our interviews with coordination unit staff were transcribed and returned to participants for comment, amendment and/or addition before analysis.

Thirty-nine coordination unit staff (12 coordinators and 27 Child Development Officers (CDOs)) and 54 carers participated in the project. Of the carers:

■ 26 (48%) were culturally and linguistically diverse
■ 27 (50%) had a qualification (ranging from one-year FDC certificate to four-year bachelor degree)
■ average time as a carer was 12 years (range: < 1–24 years)
■ 54 cared for a total of 309 children, with an average of six children per week, per carer.

Interview transcripts and survey responses were analysed using grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Being influenced by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), that views the development of children as in the centre of a nest of concentric circles of influences, we identified five major areas that influenced the inclusion of children in FDC. These factors related to the: (1) child; (2) family; (3) carer; (4) scheme; and (5) sociopolitical context. Data was coded and then grouped into these major categories.

Findings

Early in the investigation, it became apparent that schemes were aware of the ISA but were somewhat uncertain as to its role and the role of the ISF. We also identified that there were children with disabilities enrolled in the 12 schemes—but not as many as we would expect, given the figures provided in the 2004 Census of Child Care Services (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005).

Another finding was that there was rarely a protocol in place for the way concerns with children’s development should be raised with parents. Rather, approaches varied from scheme to scheme—in some schemes, it was the coordination unit staff’s responsibility to raise concerns with families about their child’s development, in others this was left to carers, either with or without support from the scheme. Because raising concerns about children’s development with parents can be highly emotionally charged, the inconsistency surrounding this important responsibility was highly problematic for all concerned. (Further detail relating to these findings can be found in our report Breaking down the barriers (Wong & Cumming, 2008)).

The remaining findings related to factors that carers and/or scheme staff considered likely to support or inhibit the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC. We report these findings in tabular form (see Tables 2 to 6). Quotes from the participants are italicised within the tables and provide examples of the types of comments that were made.

Table 2. Factors relating to the child likely to inhibit and support inclusion in family day care (FDC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors related to the child likely to inhibit inclusion</th>
<th>Factors related to the child likely to support inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Some disabilities were considered too demanding or difficult to manage in an FDC environment (e.g. autism, wheelchair use).</td>
<td>• Some disabilities were considered manageable in the FDC home (e.g. mild physical disability in young children).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Older children were considered to be more ‘difficult’ to care for.</td>
<td>• Having previous experience with the child (e.g. child has been in care before diagnosis, or from a baby) often led to a ‘bond’ that facilitated ongoing care.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Factors relating to families likely to inhibit and support inclusion in family day care (FDC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors related to families likely to inhibit inclusion</th>
<th>Factors related to families likely to support inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Families’ lack of awareness of FDC and its appropriateness for children with disabilities: I think when it comes to children with additional needs, parents perceive them as needing formalised care.</td>
<td>• The promotion of FDC as an appropriate care environment for children with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child Development Officers’ (CDOs’) or carers’ fear that ‘other’ families would remove their children from care.</td>
<td>• Families of ‘other’ children in care generally seemed to be supportive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CDOs’ or carers’ negative experience with a family member with a disability.</td>
<td>• CDOs/carers having previous positive experience of a family member with a disability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CDOs/carers having family members who work in the disability sector.</td>
<td>• CDOs/carers having family members who work in the disability sector.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4. Factors relating to carers likely to inhibit and support inclusion in family day care (FDC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors related to carers likely to inhibit inclusion</th>
<th>Factors related to carers likely to support inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carers’ negative beliefs about: disability; children’s rights to inclusive environments; appropriateness of FDC for children with disabilities: FDC is for normal kids. The kids requiring special and specific care should be taken care of in a facility that is especially designed and built for such kids.</td>
<td>Carers’ beliefs that FDC has potential benefits for children with disabilities, the other children in care, and families: FDC can be good for children with special needs because it’s a small group, it’s quiet, settled, structured and disciplined. There is a sense of security and the children are closer to each other, it’s like they’re from the same family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material barriers: size and structure of the FDC home; carers’ physical capacity; negative effects on income.</td>
<td>Carers’ altruistic motivations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers’ psychological capacity: It makes me too depressed. I’m too emotional and cannot cope. It needs a special person—sympathetic, physically able and emotionally stable.</td>
<td>Carers’ feelings of personal reward and self-satisfaction when working with children with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of being seen as a ‘bad’ carer: When children’s behaviour is atypical—the carer can be viewed suspiciously. This also happens in playgroup—some carers criticise others.</td>
<td>Carers basing their care on a philosophy of inclusion: Caring for children with special needs has for me to be met with the one simple philosophy—that all children are children first, and disability second. The disability must take second place to the child’s needs for social growth, therefore inclusion is focused on the child’s social needs and all other needs then follow. The child is more important to focus on than the disability. When they come to FDC, they come to play. If I lose sight of this I cheat the child of an invaluable part of childhood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers’ fears about their capacity to include children with disabilities: Carers are fearful of being the sole responsibility for a child with ongoing high needs.</td>
<td>Support from the scheme (e.g. playgroups, toy libraries, training, support from Child Development Officers, including strategies for working with children with disabilities).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers’ concerns that including a child with disabilities will have a negative effect on ‘other’ children in care.</td>
<td>Support from peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers’ feelings of isolation and vulnerability: Caring for a child with ongoing high needs can be extremely hard work, and I feel a little lonely caring for another three or four children at the same time while home alone.</td>
<td>Carers’ physical capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers’ belief in their capacity and willingness to modify their FDC environment.</td>
<td>Carers’ capacity and willingness to modify their FDC environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial compensation for loss of income, and knowledge about the availability of this funding.</td>
<td>Financial compensation for loss of income, and knowledge about the availability of this funding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5. Factors relating to schemes likely to inhibit and support inclusion in family day care (FDC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors related to the FDC scheme likely to inhibit inclusion</th>
<th>Factors related to the FDC scheme likely to support inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinators’ doubts and/or concerns: about the capacity of carers to include children with disabilities.</td>
<td>Coordinators’/Child Development Officers’ (CDOs’) beliefs that FDC has potential benefits for children with disabilities, the other children in care, families and carers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that caring for children with disabilities will have a negative effect on carers’ wellbeing or income: I feel responsible for the emotional wellbeing of my carers, and it’s an issue for the carer’s own family as well. What are the carer’s needs, and what are they actually willing to do? The potential effects are magnified because: it’s in her home, it’s her family, it’s her income, it’s her business, she is alone. There are a small number of children in FDC groups. In a centre, it’s less personal, which could be worse for the child, but there is less impact on the carer personally, and the cost of the extra care required is diffused across the whole service, and there are more people to cope.</td>
<td>Coordinators’/CDOs’ positive beliefs about carers’ capacity to work with children with disabilities: The carers do a very good job of working with them, the small setting is good for children with special needs, they get something different, it’s personal and intimate and the carer really gets to know them. The inclusion is total, other families get involved in sharing the milestones of all the children in the group and there’s an ongoing relationship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors related to the FDC scheme likely to inhibit inclusion

- Scheme staffs’ lack of awareness/skills in supporting children with ongoing high support needs: *It’s difficult to support a carer if the CDO/scheme itself is not knowledgeable with the needs of a child with disabilities high support needs. Although we’re trained childcare workers, we’re not trained for working with children with disabilities.*
- Scheme staff under time and resource pressures.

Factors related to the FDC scheme likely to support inclusion

- Having scheme staff with capacity and confidence to support carers’ work with children with disabilities.
- Having scheme staff who are committed to inclusion: *We want to break the barriers of carers not even thinking about the possibility of taking special needs children, we want to get the carer to meet the child and their family.*

Table 6. Factors relating to the sociopolitical context likely to inhibit and support inclusion in family day care (FDC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors related to the sociopolitical context likely to inhibit inclusion</th>
<th>Factors related to the sociopolitical context likely to support inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative community image of FDC: <em>People don’t know about FDC. It has poor standing in the community and with others in early childhood. It’s tied up with the image of care as women’s work</em></td>
<td>Schemes’ ‘connectedness’ to services outside the scheme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from scheme sponsoring body.</td>
<td>Support from the sponsoring body</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of findings

Our study identified several factors related to the child, family, carer, scheme, and the sociopolitical context that can inhibit or support the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC. Similar to previous studies (Buell et al., 1999; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Devinebeil et al., 1998; Wayne, 2006), we identified a range of factors that might inhibit inclusion: carers’ beliefs about disability, children’s rights to inclusive environments and the appropriateness of FDC for children with disabilities; the suitability of the FDC home; carers’ physical capacity; their fears and anxieties about their capacity to care for children with disabilities; their perceptions of the negative effect that caring for a child with disabilities might have on ‘other’ children in care; and their fear of loss of income or loss of ‘other’ families.

We also identified several factors that are likely to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC. Similar to Devore and Hanley-Maxwell (2000), our findings suggest that having a clearly articulated philosophy founded on children’s rights to inclusive environments, as well as beliefs about the benefits of FDC for all children, families and carers, is likely to facilitate inclusive practice. Further, as was found in other studies (Buell et al., 1999; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Devinebeil et al., 1998; Wayne, 2006), having previous positive experience of caring for children with disabilities, or having a previous relationship with a child prior to diagnosis was found to be facilitative. Other important contributing factors for supporting carers to include children with disabilities that were identified include: training for ‘special needs’, particularly in the carers’ home from a special needs educator; the availability of resources (including playgroups, home visits, modelling and materials); and financial compensation for loss of income, as well as the knowledge about the availability of such funds. In addition, carers mentioned that support from both their carer peers and their family is crucial.

Discussion

This study provided some important insights into factors that inhibit and support the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC in NSW. That many of these findings are similar to those found in previous research conducted in the USA (Buell et al., 1999; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000; Devinebeil et al., 1998; Wayne, 2006) supports the veracity of the findings, but, nevertheless, is somewhat surprising.

In NSW, unlike in the USA, FDC carers have the support of a coordination unit, as well as ISAs. Theoretically, the coordination unit and ISA should increase carers’ capacity to include children with disabilities and one would expect that the barriers to inclusion would be reduced. Indeed, several carers who were caring for children with disabilities in our study did comment positively on the important role the coordination unit played in increasing their capacity to care for these children. However, things are not that simple.

The coordination unit staff’s skills with working with children with disability, their knowledge about the supports available to carers, and their personal beliefs—about children with disabilities, disability itself, and the role of
FDC in supporting these children—is highly influential. Our findings suggest that the views of coordination unit staff about the inclusion of children with disabilities in FDC were ambivalent. The coordination unit staff are the gatekeepers in FDC in NSW, as contact between families and carers is usually mediated through them. Without skilled, knowledgeable staff who are committed to inclusion, it is unlikely that families with children with disabilities will be referred to carers. Consequently, it is essential that those striving to support inclusion in FDC, such as ISFs, work closely with coordination unit staff to provide opportunities for them to critically reflect on their ideas. How their ideas influence inclusive practice, as well as challenging coordination unit staff to work from the perspective of a child’s right to inclusion in FDC, are also crucial. At the time of conducting this investigation, the ISAs had only been operating for a short time, and while coordination unit staff in this study reported that they had heard about the ISA, their understanding of the supports available was limited and sometimes inaccurate. As such, it is too early to say how beneficial the ISA will be in supporting coordination unit staff.

Further, we identified a ‘maternalistic’ dynamic within FDC schemes which may be inhibiting the capacity of carers to include children with additional needs. Responses from the coordination unit staff suggested that they felt it was their job to ‘protect’ their carers (see, for example, the quote in Table 5, where a scheme coordinator stated ‘I feel responsible for the emotional wellbeing of my carers’), and that they thought carers needed things done for them. While such perspectives are perhaps understandable, given the low level of qualifications among carers and the high demands associated with including children with disabilities, they do little to empower carers. Further, if coordination unit staff fail to pass on to carers important information about the supports available to them to include children with disabilities, carers cannot make informed decisions about their capacity to care for these children. So the role of the ISA is somewhat inhibited.

We speculated that the root of this ‘maternalism’ was coordination unit staff’s fear of losing their ‘power’ over carers. Coordination unit staff’s power is inherent in their position as the gatekeepers in FDC. In several schemes we visited, coordination unit staff suggested that, if carers become self-sufficient, the current FDC coordination unit model would become redundant—thereby the coordination unit staff would lose their position and power. Perhaps there is an opportunity for those concerned with increasing inclusion in FDC to work with coordination unit staff to model how capacity building with carers can result in power sharing, not power loss (McCashen, 2005).

Our study has some limitations. We were not able to obtain input from all schemes in our region or from all carers, due to the unavailability of coordination unit staff to participate, or to facilitate carers’ participation. However, our sample consisted of carers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and with varying experience, so our research portrays a wide range of views. Future research could test the consistency of our findings across other schemes and/or regions. Further, due to time limitations, we were not able to capture the voices of families or children in this study. To broaden the scope of research examining inclusion in FDC, an important next step is to examine the experience of inclusion in FDC of children with disabilities, their peers and their families—and especially to investigate the basis of parents’ education and care choices when their child has a disability.

If FDC schemes are to be more inclusive of children with disabilities—and we would argue that they should be—values-based and structural barriers to inclusion will have to be addressed by them. Therefore, a starting point for increasing the capacity of all those working in FDC to include all children might be the factors facilitating inclusion that we have identified here.

References


Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the carers, coordination unit staff and Inclusion Support Facilitators who took part in this study. We also appreciate the valuable feedback of Dr Joy Goodfellow given on an earlier draft of this paper.

Appendix 1

Carer postal survey

1. Could you please tell us a little about yourself.
   ■ How many children do you care for?
   ■ How many days do you work?
   ■ What languages do you speak?
   ■ Do you have any formal early childhood or other relevant qualifications?
   ■ What led you to become a carer?

2. Could you please tell us a little about your scheme.
   ■ What services are available to support carers within your scheme? (e.g. playgroups / carers’ meetings / training sessions)
   ■ How often do you attend these services?
   ■ How useful do you find them?

3. Could you please tell us some ‘stories’ about any children with ongoing high support needs that you have, or have had in the past, in your care?

4. Sometimes there are things about children with ongoing high support needs (such as the type of disability they have) that affects our ability to care for them. What things about children do you think would affect your ability to care for them?

5. Sometimes families affect our ability to care for children with ongoing high support needs. What family factors might affect your ability to care for children with ongoing high support needs?

6. Sometimes there are things about carers that affect their ability to care for children with ongoing high support needs, such as their knowledge, skills and experiences. What are, or could be, some of the things affecting your ability to care for children with ongoing high support needs?

7a. A carer’s ability to care for children with ongoing high support needs might be influenced by the support they get from their Child Development Officer (CDO) and scheme. How might your CDO and scheme affect your ability to care for children with high ongoing support needs?

7b. Is there anything that your scheme could do to support you better?

8. What are some of the things outside of your scheme, for instance, financial support, that might affect your ability to care for children with ongoing high support needs?

9. Finally, SDN Inclusion Support Agency (ISA) wants to do all it can to support the inclusion of children with high ongoing support needs in FDC. What are some of the ways we could assist you? Thank you for completing the survey! SDN ISA appreciates you spending the time to share your ideas and thoughts with us.
Findings from an evaluation of an intervention targeting Australian parents of young children with attachment issues: The ‘Through the Looking Glass’ (TtLG) project

Pam Murphy  
Kaye Colmer  
Margaret O’Neill  
Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Adelaide  

Paul Aylward  
University of Adelaide

This article reports on the evaluation of the ‘Through the Looking Glass’ project, a three-year intervention conducted in five childcare settings across Australia and engaging 126 ‘at-risk’ families where there was an identified relationship between the parent and child/children (aged birth to five years). The evaluation embraced a pragmatic mixed-methods approach triangulating data sources and methods and employing participatory action research procedures. These included pre- and post-project video recordings and follow-up interviews up to 18 months after project completion. A broad range of positive impacts were achieved and sustained — mothers were significantly less stressed, depressed and anxious; were significantly more emotionally available; and reported being better able to cope and practise as parents. Children’s wellbeing and involvement improved significantly, with improved child behaviours attributed to the project identified by staff and mothers. This paper presents the intervention, evaluation and findings for the mothers and children who participated in the project.

Background

There is considerable research evidence that events and experiences in the early years can affect a child’s physical and emotional health, their social and cognitive development, as well as later educational achievement and life success (Emde, 1998; Mc Cain & Mustard, 1999; Mc Cain & Mustard, 2002; Perry & Pollard, 1998; Shore, 1997). In these ways, early childhood experiences lay down the foundations for later life relationships and successes (Mc Cain & Mustard, 1999; Perry & Pollard, 1998; Shore, 1997; St Pierre & Layzer, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Attachment, defined as an affectionate bond between an infant and caregiver (Bowlby, 1988), has a strong influence on self-esteem and social skills (Kenny, Lomax, Brabec & Fife, 1988), and has been shown to be important for psychological, behavioural and social adjustment outcomes in later life (Cole, Michel & O’Donnell-Teti, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Kobak, Cassidy, Lyons-Ruth & Ziv, 2006; Ooi, Ang, Fung, Wong & Cai, 2006; Rice, 1990; Thompson, 2001).

There have been relatively few interventions applying models influenced by attachment theory and research, and some disagreement regarding the efficacy and success of these interventions; this has led to calls for more evaluation of intervention models addressing parental attachment (Hoffman, Marvin, Cooper & Powell, 2006). However, several studies have demonstrated that attachment theory-based interventions can enhance toddler security, increase parent sensitive responsiveness and decrease child problem behaviours (Berlin, Ziv, Amaya-Jackson & Greenberg, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2006; Lieberman & Zeanah, 1999; van Zeijl et al., 2006). Helping mothers to reflect upon their child’s behaviour and their own behaviour and attitudes in a supportive, therapeutic setting, and to learn about attachment theory itself, have been found to lead to enhanced child security outcomes (Eagle, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2006). The need for more longitudinal follow-up research to assess the extent to which beneficial intervention impacts may be sustained and evolve has also been highlighted (Eagle, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2006).

Funded over three years by the Australian Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy’s Early Childhood—Invest to Grow stream (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009), the ‘Through the Looking Glass’ (TtLG) project is a health, education and welfare collaborative early intervention. It develops the existing capacity of five childcare settings (sites) across Australia...
The TtLG intervention

The TtLG project provided intensive psychosocial support, therapeutic intervention and child care as a package for high-risk families, in order to develop and support secure attachment relationships between mother and child. The primary target group was mothers of children aged birth to five years. The participating families came from diverse backgrounds but all exhibited multiple risk factors, such as anxiety, depression or social isolation, and many of the parents had reported early trauma in their own lives.

The intervention involved a multifaceted approach, with each childcare centre site employing a clinician (an experienced social worker trained in attachment and the ‘Circle of Security’), co-facilitator and primary caregiver (both of whom were experienced childcare workers) to work with each recruited family. The program was based on attachment theory and draws from the Circle of Security project model, utilising project tools such as the Circle of Security and Repair graphics, which assists parents, health professionals and childcare staff to understand and integrate attachment theory into practice (Marvin, Hoffman, Cooper, & Powell, 2002).

The Circle of Security differs from other attachment-informed approaches in its emphasis on the importance in child development of both attachment security and exploration (Eagle, 2006). In this model, the caregiver encourages and is attuned to the child’s need to explore the world from a ‘safe haven’ to which they can return to be comforted when distressed. Secure attachment therefore facilitates safe exploration to learn about the world and enables the child to acquire developmental competences (Hoffman et al., 2006). This model provides an understanding of children’s behaviour from an emotional needs perspective and aims to make attachment concepts more accessible to parents and professionals.

A distinctive requirement of the project was that participating families would enrol their child for two days of child care per week for the duration of the project. This enabled children and parents to develop a relationship with a primary caregiver from within the childcare centre in order to help parents work towards their goals. In this way, the childcare workers became therapeutic partners with the clinicians; staff involved in the project worked across discipline boundaries to collaboratively address the complex health needs of each family.

Parents were required to attend weekly psychosocial groupwork sessions over the 18-week duration of the project and individual counselling was also available for mothers as needed. The weekly therapeutic sessions followed a schedule that introduced mothers to concepts of attachment theory and used video footage of each of the mothers interacting with their child for group reflection. Key concepts of emotional availability, state of mind and empathy were a focus and some of the tools developed from the Circle of Security project were adopted, such as the Circle of Security graphic, ‘You are so beautiful’, a video constructed by the group facilitator using footage from each of the mother–child videos to represent how a child sees their parent; and ‘Shark music’, a video that helps provide insights into state of mind and how past experiences creep into the present to distort how behaviours are interpreted. Further details of the intervention may be obtained

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This paper presents the intervention, evaluation and specific findings for the mothers and children who participated in the project (Objectives 3–4 above). The full evaluation report may be accessed from: http://health.adelaide.edu.au/gp/publications.
from the Lady Gowrie Thebarton website at: www.
througthelookingglass.org.au.

There were six implementations of the project (referred to as ‘waves’) conducted, each lasting five months. Up to seven families were recruited for each of the five sites per wave. The project was guided by a reference group which provided expertise in psychiatry, psychology, education and child care and included representatives of each TtLG stakeholder group (including a consumer). This group also acted as a ‘critical reference group’ for the evaluation (Wadsworth, 1998), informing and tailoring its approach to optimise appropriateness and efficiency.

**Evaluation methodology and procedures**

The evaluation embraced a mixed-methods paradigmatically pragmatic stance (Greene & Caracelli, 1997). This approach highlights the practical benefit of combining methods in research and evaluation, drawing out useful strategies from different traditions but shifting emphasis away from the philosophical difficulties of doing so, in order to more thoroughly address and explore the issues at hand (Bazeley, 2004; Krantz, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). By triangulating quantitative and qualitative approaches and varying data sources to obtain a range of stakeholder perspectives (Denzin, 1989), the evaluation established the intervention’s impact and acceptability using objective standardised tools, complemented by the participants’ subjective and personally articulated experiences. The evaluation also drew on aspects of ‘utilisation-focused evaluation’ (Quinn Patton, 1997) using participatory action research procedures (Sankaran, Dick, Passfield & Swayne, 2001; Wadsworth, 1998) which both engage stakeholders in partnerships to conduct evaluation activities and establish mechanisms for evaluation findings to be relayed back to the project for ongoing improvement.

Capacity training in the evaluation techniques and procedures for the project was delivered to all staff during a three-day planning event in Adelaide prior to the first wave. This included collaboratively working around the design of the evaluation plan and inclusively identifying suitable indicators to assess process and impact. While the evaluation was designed and managed by the external evaluator (PA), an evaluation assistant (MO), based at Lady Gowrie, Thebarton, Adelaide, was enlisted to enhance the integration of evaluation procedures with the project, ongoing liaison with TtLG staff and feedback into project practice. Formal evaluation feedback throughout the project was facilitated through regular reference group meetings involving the evaluators and project management, with presentation sessions following each wave to facilitate discussion and planning for project improvement (evaluation was a standing agenda item for each reference group meeting).

The evaluation fully conformed to National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guidelines, and ethics approval was granted by the Children Youth & Women’s Health Service Human Research Ethics Committee in Adelaide.

**Evaluation methods**

Self-reported instruments and approaches

A post-project self-completion survey was administered to mothers on completion of the project, addressing a range of process and impact indicators. These included self-reported changes in parenting knowledge, confidence, skills, bonding with their child, coping, parenting practices and child behaviour attributable to the project. The extent to which mothers had valued and shared newly acquired parenting information with others was addressed and the degree to which social networks and friendships had been established through the project was also explored. The questionnaires were sealed in envelopes that had been supplied for confidentiality and sent directly to the evaluation assistant in Adelaide for data entry. Supplemental data from fathers was obtained by self-completion questionnaire.

Sustained impacts for targeted families over the medium term were addressed through semi-structured follow-up telephone surveys of all mothers from the first three waves, three months after completing the program. Sustained outcomes over a longer time period were addressed through a similar follow-up survey of Wave 2 and Wave 3 families, 16–18 months after completing the project. These waves were selected as the project reached a state of maturity following Wave 1, and provided a practical benefit of addressing longer term impact assessment within the three-year funding period of the project.

The evaluation also addressed all professional stakeholders who had engaged with the project. Experiences of project management, site managers, project clinicians and project co-facilitators were examined through formal email surveys and a series of semi-structured interviews across all five project sites. To supplement these, two focus groups with site staff who were not directly involved with the project were also conducted to explore the extent to which broader working practices across the childcare centres had been influenced by the project. Supplementary conceptual understanding of how the project operated ‘in situ’ was acquired through the ‘quasi-ethnographic’ method ‘rapid reconnaissance’ (Beebe, 2001) for selected sites; this involved the evaluation assistant visiting three sites for several hours to observe how the project was operating (noting privacy of rooms, resources being utilised or displayed) and to conduct informal interviews with staff.
Standardised instruments

In order to assess changes in the mother–child attachment relationships, the emotional availability (EA) assessment of mother and child interactions was implemented (Biringen, 2000). This assesses the level of secure attachment between mother and child, by reviewing parent–child interactions using six domains with independent coding ranges:

- **Parent sensitivity** (1–9): mother’s positive responsiveness and behaviour towards her child.
- **Parent structuring** (1–5): mother’s ability to provide support (or structure) for her child’s learning and play and to set limits when necessary.
- **Parent non-intrusiveness** (1–5): mother’s ability to provide autonomy for her child and to be available without being interfering.
- **Parent non-hostility** (1–5): mother’s ability to regulate negative or hostile emotions.
- **Child responsiveness to parent** (1–7): child’s pleasure and responsiveness when interacting with their mother.
- **Child involvement of parent** (1–7): child’s interest and ability in engaging their mother into play.

TtLG clinicians were provided training in videotaping in order to record mother–child interactions in the family home or other familiar setting, such as the childcare centre (following a ‘settling-in’ period of several weeks). The pre- and post-program videotapes were sent from each site to qualified EA assessors based in Sydney for coding. Ratings across each domain were subsequently relayed back to Adelaide for central analysis.

The TtLG children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement were assessed by childcare centre staff, using the Children’s Wellbeing and Involvement Observations tool (Laevers, 2005; Laevers, Debruyckere, Silkens & Snoeck, 2005; Winter, 2003). Staff were provided with training to observe and rate each child’s behaviour, activities and interactions with staff and other children and to calculate overall wellbeing and involvement scores.

In addressing mothers’ wellbeing, it was hypothesised that the project would reduce levels of parental stress, anxiety and depression. Specific standardised tools were selected to measure these concepts—the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) short form (Abidin, 1995) and the Hospital and Anxiety Depression Scale (HADS) (Zigmond & Snaith, 1983).

**Selection of a participatory action research design**

The participatory action research (PAR) design of this evaluation was informed by the need to apply a methodology which embraced and informed project evolution and development over time, in order to enhance the development of a service model. The evaluation rejected establishing a control/comparison group for a number of practical, ethical and design reasons. Recruiting equivalent ‘needy’ cases and denying them the intervention for comparative purposes presented profound logistical and ethical problems and ran the risk of alienating stakeholders engaged in delivering the service (and administering the evaluation). There were also a series of logistical barriers and substantial costs in applying the standardised evaluation instruments (particularly those involving videoing child–parent interactions) for families not engaged with the project. Causal attribution was therefore established primarily through triangulating methods and data sources and seeking qualitative explanations for changes observed.

**Findings and discussion**

The following findings focus on process, impact and outcomes for the participating families. The evolution of the best-practice service model will be addressed in a separate report.

**Participation**

The project recruited 138 families, with 126 of these (including 160 children) completing the five-month program (a client retention rate of 91.3%). The demographic data provided below therefore summarises information collected from the 138 recruited families. Of the 12 mothers who did not complete the program, four failed to commence and eight left for reasons that were not related to the project or to any of the demographic variables considered in the evaluation (country of birth, education level, marital status, employment status or main income source).

Pre- and post-evaluation survey data was completed by 118 of the 126 mothers who completed the project (a response rate of 93.7%). The three-month follow-up survey of the 61 participating mothers from Waves 1–3 yielded a response rate of 82% (n = 50). The further follow-up conducted 16–18 months after project completion, for mothers who had attended during Waves 2 and 3, yielded a response rate of 73% (n = 29). Relatively few fathers (n = 24) were recruited for project activities, of whom 14 provided evaluation feedback (a response rate of 58%).

**Demographics**

The majority of mothers recruited to the project identified themselves as ‘Australian’ (83.3%, n = 115) and only two as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The remaining respondents who indicated their backgrounds (n = 18) were from 12 different, mainly European, countries. The relationship status indicated by recruited mothers was: 40% (n = 55) were married, 28% (n = 39) were single, a further 15% (n = 21) were in ‘de facto’ relationships, 9% (n = 13) separated and two divorced.
Just over half of the mothers recruited to the project had educational qualifications beyond Year 12 (n = 72), with 21.7% (n = 30) having a university degree and 30.4% (n = 42) a vocational certificate or diploma from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or college. However, around one in five of the mothers who provided information indicated they had not reached Year 12 (n = 27).

Half of the recruited mothers were in some kind of paid employment, with 17.4% (n = 24) indicating ‘full-time work’; 30.4% (n = 42) indicated they were full-time parents or were unemployed and not looking for work. The main source of income came from wages or salaries (either their own or a partner’s) for 51.4% (n = 71). However, for over one-third of families, the main source of income came from a government benefit, pension or allowance (34.8%, n = 48). These tended to be single mothers, making up 67.4% of those on benefit/allowance/pension. If ‘separated’ and ‘divorced’ are included, this proportion rises to 79.2% (n = 38).

Process evaluation

Mothers were very positive about their experiences during the project, and these feelings continued after completion. Mothers enjoyed the sessions provided and felt comfortable to freely explore their parenting and attachment issues with project staff (see Figure 1). Over nine in 10 mothers felt relaxed and safe at the childcare centre they attended. They felt comfortable with the workers and found it easy to get along with their primary caregiver. Mothers clearly enjoyed the weekly sessions and the childcare and primary caregiving ethos of the centres were also highly valued. Very few found the sessions difficult to attend. Mothers who attended the project continued to be enthusiastic about it long after finishing.

Mothers commented particularly on the way the sites and staff had made them feel comfortable and relaxed and this appeared to have provided a base from which they could enjoy experiencing the project:

> Everybody was welcoming, not like other places I’ve had to go to with our issues.
> Good place … childcare workers are friendly. I could ask his carer any questions.
> Meeting in the childcare centre was relaxing for me, I looked forward to Tuesdays … was a great experience.
> All the people were wonderful there; the whole thing was about getting in touch with little brains.
> … it made me feel happier meeting other people like me.
> Really satisfied with it, all activities worked, (clinician) made you feel comfortable.
> Wonderful … it should be compulsory for all mothers leaving hospital; they shouldn’t be without this information.

(Source: Post-project self-completion survey)
Given the integrated and holistic approach adopted in the project model, it was difficult to identify the most important factors that facilitated improved impacts. More than eight in 10 mothers indicated that 80% of the strategies employed had helped them understand their child’s attachment needs (with six in 10 indicating that 70% of strategies had helped them ‘a lot’) (Figure 2).

Clearly however, the combinations of group and individual work with clinicians and reflections on the child–parent videotapes, guided by insights from attachment theory and the Circle of Security, have contributed to greater understanding of attachment, with more than eight in 10 mothers indicating these two approaches had helped them a lot. This is evident in the mothers’ written comments on completing the project:

- The whole concept. I have changed my views on child needs and parenting.
- The Circle of Security makes sense and it’s good to watch the video of me and my kids and see the circles actually happening in action; develops understanding.
- Reinforcement of attachment model through many different examples, situations etc., especially video of each attendee was good as it helps me with thinking of how to respond to different situations at home. Opportunity to really discuss parenting issues with other mums away from children in a non-judgmental group helped.
- Learning about Circle of Security and Repair. Looking at my child’s feelings—what’s going on behind the behaviour and helping him to work through his feelings.
- The personal videotaping was very helpful; it helped me to gain insight about my behaviour and my children’s responses and vice versa.
- The Shark Music clarified my worries. I am more aware of my fears and my child’s needs and emotional transference.
- Learning Stories—don’t think they have helped me understand the attachment needs but I think that this and the family photos are very valuable in building attachment and relating to my child about the day at child care. Also for the primary caregiver to learn about home life and my child’s interests etc.

(Source: Post-project self-completion survey)

The three-month follow-up survey revealed that mothers spontaneously asserted that they continued to value both the child care and primary caregiver components of the TtLG project:

- Child care—the best thing for me has been taking the opportunity to have ‘time out’ without the children. Breathing space—time to find who I am again—I am actually a human being!
- The primary caregiver system should be compulsory as it is better for the security of the child. Wow. Works well.

(Source: Three-month follow-up telephone survey)
The 16–18-month follow-up of mothers found they reaffirmed the usefulness of the broad range of project elements; over half of the sample spontaneously indicated several or all aspects of the project were the ‘most helpful’. The role of the clinician, use of video in group and individual sessions, the Circle of Security, and meeting and talking to other mums were all individually cited:

[Clinician’s] advice and looking at the video of all the other families. That made it easier to understand how children move around the circle.

It was all helpful. The circle information helped [me] understand that children need to explore, you don’t have to control everything for them … Watching the videos helped me understand the different ways that children ask for help.

The circle, showing how children move around and need to explore and how you have to be there for them. Watching the videos really helped [me] understand, plus it gave you some ideas about what the other mothers were doing with their child.

It was all a lot of help, [clinician] really helped with the video showing me how [child 1] was behaving and doing things with [child 2]. Now I can better anticipate what they will be doing.

(Source: 16–18-month follow-up telephone survey)

Impact and outcome evaluation—findings from self-reports, interviews and focus groups

Surveys indicated that 91.5% (n = 108) of mothers agreed that the project had helped them to feel closer to their child, with over half of these feeling this strongly. Over eight in 10 indicated the project had helped them to feel good about themselves as parents and 76% (n = 90) were more confident to look for other services and supports for their family (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Improvements in aspects of parenting wellbeing attributed to project participation (% of mothers)

Nearly all mothers surveyed on completing the project (97.5%, n = 115) indicated that they had learnt more about parenting and attachment, with over nine in 10 being more confident to respond to their child’s needs; feeling better able to cope as a parent; feeling closer to their child; and acquiring more understanding of their child’s attachment and exploration needs:

Although there will always be situations and issues with my child which will challenge me, I feel the information discussed has provided me with a working model with which I can face these, now and in the future. It is one which I am comfortable with and which solves much confusion.

I feel the models provided should be taught to all parents in the community to help them better understand their children and child development and am therefore very grateful to have received the opportunity to participate in this project.

Feel much closer to [son] than could have ever thought. Enabled me to understand [son], his behaviour, actions and why I react the way I do.

I have learnt so much about the way my daughter reacts and why and how to deal with it. In conjunction, all this is due to [clinician] and she is truly an asset to this project and for that I am forever grateful.

The project has helped me to understand my child’s point of view more and to look at situations, conflicts and challenges from many angles.

I look at the strategies I have learnt from the looking glass and I am able to meet a lot [more] of my child’s needs than what I could before.

Looking at the world through my child’s perspective and learning how to do that was invaluable to me. Even though I am very much struggling with my son still, this course has given me a lot of tools to work with and keep utilising. I know it’s not a quick fix but I’m definitely not giving up on my son or our family.

(Source: Post-project self-completion survey)

For many mothers these impacts have been sustained. In the three-month follow-up survey, 88% (n = 44) of mothers reported lasting positive changes in the way they do things with their children. The same number reported increased responsiveness to their children and ability to read their cues since completing the project. Increased confidence in responding to their child’s attachment needs was reported by 80% (n = 40) and 74% (n = 37) reported getting less frustrated with their children. All of the 29 mothers who were surveyed 16–18 months after completing the project provided examples of how they continued to apply learning and skills acquired through it. Mothers reported sustained confidence and competence in parenting, ongoing empathetic understanding and
sustained better parenting practices (despite children now being considerably older, presenting new challenges):

She’s a toddler now and wants to play. I can see that she does things of the circle I can help her when things aren’t right. Like when she’s tired she can get frustrated with toys and things, I know to cuddle her and settle her down.

Made me stop and think more … like thinking about why [child] got upset.

We’re both confident with [child]. It was good to be able to talk about the things I learnt from [clinician].

Yes, it helped me to find out about how children need you in different ways.

I feel better about [child’s] behaviour; it made me stop getting angry with [child].

Yes, it’s just so different. It’s made a big difference to how I feel as a mother.

I am confident with [child]; it’s different now he is very active but I can support him.

I think I can understand [child] better and so there isn’t as much stress.

I know I am doing better now, it’s important for [child] to develop in her own way.

I guess now I just can stop their fights starting … like I can see when one of them is getting upset and I can sort of get in and fix it up first so they don’t really get going.

(Source: 16–18-month follow-up telephone survey)

A variety of data sources support positive changes in child behaviour attributable to the project. Over eight in 10 mothers (83%, n = 98) reported improved positive child behaviour changes as a result of completing the project (with 41%, n = 48 indicating ‘definitely improved’). This impact appears to be lasting, with 88% (n = 44) of mothers surveyed in the three-month follow-up affirming this; it is likely that this has been reinforced by more positive parenting practices:

Major changes … he is coming out of himself … looks to new people in our life … he is happier.

He is more confident. I let him explore and follow his lead. I don’t try to always make a game for him; I follow him and no longer say don’t do this.

[Child] used to be clingy, now she’s happy and goes to kindy four days a week; she’s turned into a real social creature and wants to go more days.

(Source: Three-month follow-up telephone survey)

Given that the children of mothers surveyed in the 16–18-month follow-up interviews were significantly older than they were during the intervention (with many moving from being babies to toddlers), mothers indicated that they found it difficult to attribute their child’s long-term behaviour change to the project. However, mothers reported sustained improvement in family functioning. Many felt they could do more with their children, enjoyed parenting, were better able to cope and felt they were better parents as a result of the project:

I think it’s more that I understand him better. I can join in with him better.

He is changing all the time, doing more things for himself … it’s me that’s changed, I am less stressed about doing the right things with him.

Going to the course made me see that [child] was really being just a normal toddler, it’s more that I have changed.

I think I’m better at organising things, like remember to think about things from their point of view, understanding that sometimes they are just tired and whingeing and not really playing up.

I can see more about why [child] is doing things and I think that he is more confident about doing things for himself.

I’m different with [child], better than before and I know that I am a better mother when I look after myself.

I am a better parent, I enjoy them more.

I feel happier with myself for learning about how to be a better mother.

(Source: 16–18-month follow-up telephone survey)

The above findings have been supported through accounts of fathers, and professional stakeholders (both those directly involved with the project and concomitant staff at the childcare centres):

You look at the child before and after the project and you just can’t believe it’s the same child.

Absolutely fantastic to see the way the children develop and change. I can honestly say I’ve never seen such a dramatic improvement in the toddlers. It’s just a wonderful project.

It’s been amazing and totally rewarding. A fantastic experience to see the progress of the mums and children.

One little boy just didn’t speak at all. And his mum was clearly having great problems relating to him and meeting his needs. And now it’s completely different, chatting away and his mum like a different person. It’s been wonderful.

I’ve seen massive change. Massive changes. There’s been children who just wouldn’t let go of their mums at first, now interacting and playing with other kids.
Mothers being much more in control of themselves. Massive changes. Even in the appearance of some mums; their physical appearance, being happier, dressing smarter.
(Source: Focus groups childcare staff)

Project staff reported that the child–parent relationships had been enhanced through project participation; they saw the project as having built on existing strengths and helping parents to successfully address the root causes of attachment and parenting struggles:

It’s produced much stronger and secure relationships between parents and children and provided a really strong base for the future. Phenomenal success!

Exploring the strengths families have and unearthing the problems and strategies to use these to address the causes of difficulties … it’s been incredibly rewarding.

When [child] started child care she was very distressed about leaving mum. Recently she left us to go to preschool and we saw her on her first day and she was very excited about going to a new place.

When [child] commenced care he would never venture far from his primary caregiver and was distressed when other staff entered the room. He now enjoys spending time exploring the room and loves to have the opportunity to interact with the older children.

[Child] has become more creative and her imagination has expanded vastly. She now finds it easier to engage others in her dramatic play by verbalising her needs more confidently.
(Source: Interviews with TtLG staff)

Around eight in 10 mothers formed supportive friendships during the project, with over half of the mothers maintaining friendships three months after project completion. While this reduced over time, 28% of the mothers surveyed indicated they had retained these friendships 16–18 months after completing the project.

**Impact and outcome evaluation—findings from standardised instruments (pre- and post-project measures)**

Using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, psychological and behavioural improvements were found to be statistically significant in nine of the 11 dimensions measured, with large effect sizes found for reductions in mothers’ depression, anxiety and parental stress levels, and improvements in the child’s wellbeing and involvement observation ratings (Table 1).

Over the duration of the project, the number of mothers experiencing ‘moderate’ to ‘severe’ anxiety and depression (scoring 11–21 on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS)), more than halved; from 68 to 33 (anxiety) and from 43 to 13 (depression). Conversely, the numbers acquiring a ‘normal’ score (from 0–7) more than doubled for anxiety (from 27 in the pre-project measure to 53 post-project) and was over 50% higher for depression (from 57 to 87, respectively). Positive impacts in these areas were also found for more ‘marginalised’ mothers with low education levels, receiving state benefits as their household’s main income source.

Significant improvements with moderate to large effect sizes were found in the four emotional availability (EA) domains expected to improve through the project: Child responsiveness to parent, Child involvement of parent,

Table 1. Summary of statistics from pre- and post-project comparison of scores obtained from the application of standardised instruments using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test with effect size calculations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument/ dimension</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Pre-median score</th>
<th>Post-median score</th>
<th>Ties</th>
<th>z score</th>
<th>p value (1 tailed)</th>
<th>Effect size (d)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSI (stress)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>–8.149</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.997</td>
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<tr>
<td>HADS (anxiety)</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>–6.575</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HADS (depression)</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–7.123</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.8115</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>–7.484</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.944</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–7.703</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
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<td>Child responsiveness to parent (EA)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>–4.682</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.482</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child involvement of parent (EA)</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>–5.253</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.545</td>
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<td>Parent sensitivity (EA)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>–3.978</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
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<td>Parent structuring (EA)</td>
<td>117</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
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<td>0.434</td>
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<td>Parent non-intrusiveness (EA)</td>
<td>117</td>
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<td>Parent non-hostility (EA)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>–1.062</td>
<td>0.288</td>
<td>0.091</td>
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</table>

* significant at the 0.05 level  Note: PSI = Parenting Stress Index; HADS = Hospital and Anxiety Depression Scale; EA = Emotional Availability
Parent sensitivity and Parent structuring. The two remaining EA domains, Parent non-intrusiveness and Parent non-hostility, did not demonstrate significant improvement and had an effect size less than ‘small’ using Cohen’s criteria (Cohen, 1988). However, few parents performed below the optimum level in the pre-project measure of these two domains and there was general improvement for the small number who did.

There was evidence of a small minority of cases performing worse in the post-project measure for Parent non-hostility. Nonetheless, these cases experienced a range of other positive impacts from the project.

Evaluation limitations
Much of the data collection was reliant on the cooperation and diligence of the clinicians at each of the five sites. The need to plan and clarify data collection procedures was crucial to ensuring this occurred efficiently, particularly as the clinicians were all employed on a part-time basis. While these processes were addressed through training and the provision of instructions and forms, the challenges of establishing the new project in Wave 1 (affected by staff turnover) inevitably led to some delays and gaps in the collection and return of data to the evaluation assistant. Subsequently, ‘post-project’ instruments were not distributed to eight cases following Wave 1. However, investigation of demographic data collected at the beginning of the wave found these mothers to be similar demographically to those for whom complete data was available. Similar issues exacerbated by the need for staff video training and enacting procedures for the EA assessment reduced the coverage of the standardised tools in Wave 1.

Conclusions
As a result of participating in the TiLG project, parents have increased their knowledge, competence and awareness to overcome barriers to attachment. This was consistent across all participating sites. Mothers are less stressed, depressed and anxious and have described themselves as better able to cope as parents. Many report better parenting practices and improved child behaviours which they (and staff) attribute to the project, and they exhibit better engagement with their children. These findings were confirmed by standardised pre- and post-project observation measures of mother–child interactions, the reported observations of childcare staff and project workers, and accounts obtained in the mothers’ own descriptions. The complementary nature of the varied perspectives provided by different groups of stakeholders, and the consistency of findings from the quantitative and qualitative approaches applied in this evaluation through a triangulated methodology provide strong confirmatory evidence of the project’s beneficial impacts. Moreover, many parents report that these positive impacts have been sustained over a relatively long period of time since leaving the project. The few families who did not benefit in relation to one indicator or aspect, invariably benefited in a range of other areas and measures.

In the light of the evidence presented through this evaluation, there is an overwhelming case to perpetuate the project. This will build on the investment and continue to provide an intervention which has clear multiple positive impacts and sustainable benefits for Australian families. The project has demonstrated its flexibility to be adapted to different childcare centre practices and contexts and to generate a range of successful and profound outcomes for participating families.

References


Exploring transition through collective biographical memory work: Considerations for parents and teachers in early childhood education

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THIS PAPER DESCRIBES OUR exploration of the concept of transition using the methodology of collective biographical memory work (CBMW). Through analysis of a collective group of memories across the life span, we reconceptualise transition as a discursively constructed concept that is experienced as deeply confronting. Using this methodological platform, we argue for a broader view of transition that embraces a multilayered, multifaceted and complex construction which is located in the embodied and subjectified experience of the learner and those around them. As such, transition is re-viewed as a process of uncertainty/certainty, powerlessness/powerfulness and loss/gain characterised by shifting identities rather than as a type of societal initiation ritual or rite of passage. By considering this view in the context of early childhood education discourse, we suggest that emotional/embodied aspects of transition from the perspective of the child warrant further attention. The extent to which transition plays a role in learning lies, therefore, in its constructed worth to the learner rather than to those who dictate the learning agenda.

Introduction

This paper describes a study using collective biographical memory work (CBMW) as a means of deepening understandings of transition in early childhood education. By moving beyond the boundaries of dominant discourses of transitions, we explore the contradictions therein. As a group of early childhood lecturers we approached transition as an embodied experience that could be explored only through collective interaction with individual memories. This process required us, as both participants and researchers, to see embodied memories of transitory experiences as ‘discursive/textual sites’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 14) for extensive mining. The results highlight the subjectification of individuals by self and others through transition. Several considerations for early childhood education practice arise from these, since transition is re-cast as a series of embodied moments over the life span, rather than a set of desirable hurdles that are dictated by well-meaning adults.

The literature

New Zealand early childhood education practice is framed nationally within a curriculum, Te Whāki (Ministry of Education, 1996). This curriculum was developed by the early childhood education sector with a theoretical emphasis on sociocultural emancipation from traditional positivist approaches to learning (Nuttall, 2003). This, juxtaposed with a strong government agenda for a knowledge economy (see, for example, Farquhar, 2007), has resulted in the positioning of ‘transition’ in early childhood education practice as a series of valued social and developmental milestones to be mastered by the assimilating child. These milestones typically include cultural and societal events, such as starting school (Fabian, 2002; Graue, Kroeger & Brown, 2002; Ledger, Smith & Rich, 2000; Peters, 2000; Renwick, 1987), entering an early childhood service (Dali, 2001) or moving from one part of an educational service to another (Podmore, Wendt Samu, Taouma & Tapusoa, 2007). It is these geographical movements that typically capture pedagogical attention since it is argued that the smoothness of the transition creates important dispositions for future adaptation across the life span (Cowan, 1991) and is viewed as a key predictor of subsequent positive

1 The group initially comprised seven early childhood lecturers, including the authors.
transitory experiences (Dockett & Perry, 1999; 2002; see also Griebel & Niesel, 2002).

The nature of ‘transition’ itself, however, is less easily understood, with an assumption inherent in the literature that every geographical or physical shift from one institution to another ought to constitute a meaningful educational ‘transition’ in childhood. The move from early childhood to primary settings is a significant example. Cowan (1991) goes beyond this interpretation to describe transitions as ‘long-term processes that result in a qualitative reorganization of both inner life and external behaviour’. Seen in this light, transition represents some sort of:

qualitative shift from the inside looking out (how the individual understands and feels about the self and the world) and from the outside looking in (reorganization of the individual’s or family’s level of personal competence, role arrangements, and relationships with significant others) (Cowan, 1991, p. 5).

Such a view is reflected in the emphasis Podmore et al. (2007) place on the role of teachers in nurturing children’s sense of belonging through transition in the Fa’a Samoa Aoga Amata Centre of Innovation research. The authors argue that, by emphasising children’s sense of belonging, their identity is supported as an educational outcome leading to cultural competence or empowerment. This is achieved through the process of transitioning in small groups, with a primary caregiver as a stable figure, and promoting children’s institutional knowledge, such as where to put their personal belongings and where their special sleeping place is.

Viewing transition for young children as a vehicle for desirable cultural shifts strongly signals a societal agenda that to be successful one must adapt quickly to new situations and, in doing so, exhibit a ‘readiness’ (be it physical, cognitive or social) to cope with new situations (Peters, 2003). In this context, ‘readiness’ is seen as a valued attribute that facilitates a safe journey towards confidence and competence through the life span (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). In this interpretation of transition, the task of the teacher is to facilitate the child’s smooth and unproblematic shifts from one identified state to another. These shifts are signified physically by identified movement between settings or progression in competency provoked by life span events, such as being toilet-trained by two years of age or learning to write one’s name at five.

The role of adults as the decision makers of what constitutes a transition and what determines successful transitions is located within this dominant discourse. Cowan (1991, p. 5) reinforces this perspective, suggesting that adults need to approach transition by exploring “the conditions under which both normative and non normative events stimulate developmental advances, produce dysfunctional crises or leave the individual and family relatively unchanged”. This view casts transition as an adult-constructed endeavour that is ‘successfully’ achieved (or not) by children. Successful and unsuccessful transitions are typically determined by factors that tend to be readiness-oriented and these do little to challenge the common constructions of transition itself. We suggest that such an approach overlooks and perhaps even limits the complex lives of individual children.

In early childhood education, the support teachers offer in transition is therefore positioned as something that adults have to ‘do’ in order for children to be successful—for example, helping children become familiar with the new environment, gain knowledge about rules and expectations, and develop new relationships (Peters, 2000). If this preparation is done well it is anticipated that children will make the transition in an empowered way. Fabian (2002) identifies self-reliance, determination and problem solving as skills that need to be fostered in order for children to cope effectively with changes they encounter in the transition to school. These are dominant within this construct and emphasised in early childhood education practice through an emphasis on dispositions such as perseverance and resilience.

The recent Centre of Innovation research by Mangere Bridge Kindergarten (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters & Carr, 2010; Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith & Carr, 2009) moves beyond the premise that it is solely the adult’s responsibility to ensure successful transition. Instead they portray the child as a powerful agent of change who thinks about, devises and formulates, chooses and participates in various transition events. While notions of readiness and a sense of inevitability are still evident within this framing, children are not cast as completely powerless.

The purpose of our investigation was to look for the contradictions that lurk within and around this ‘normative’ discourse, and to consider the implications for early childhood education. Through this process, a broader view of transition within the context of lived, embodied memories rather than pre-determined events was revealed.

**Methodology**

Our investigation set out to interrogate the discourses that inform notions of transition in early childhood education in New Zealand through the use of CBMW. The purpose of CBMW, which is positioned within post-structural theory, is not to understand or construct knowledge around the individual self per se, or treat memories as ‘true’ events. Rather, the task is to draw on recalled memories as a means of developing insights into, and interrogating, the discourses that inform and influence one’s lived engagement in the world (Bird
Claiborne, Cornforth, Davies, Milligan & White, 2009; Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992). Davies and Gannon (2006) suggest that through the shared process of telling, listening and writing on a particular topic, it becomes possible to encounter concepts differently, with the potential to generate new theories accordingly. In the process of narrating memories, the important feature of CBMW is to generate an embodied response to the event described, rather than engaging with the factuality itself. In this way, it is possible to move beyond personal narrative and engage with the discourse, beliefs and constructions that underpin or contribute to embodied responses by the collective group.

CBMW has made a significant contribution to feminist social research internationally, and particularly within the field of psychology, since its recent development (Onyx & Small, 2001). It is, however, a relatively recent methodology in New Zealand research (Bird Claiborne et al., 2009). CBMW as a research methodology became of interest to our group as a result of our involvement with a larger project that explored the impact of the methodology for education, psychology and counselling (see Bird Claiborne et al. 2009). Ethical approval for the overarching project was obtained through Victoria University Ethics Committee in 2008. A central ethical concern for CBMW is the development, ownership and treatment of memories as they become narratives; and this became of great importance to us in the way we worked with our memories. We recognised the deep emotional responses of both the narrator and the group in the telling and re-telling of memories. A group contract was agreed from the outset and processes were made transparent to everyone. These included the opportunity for anyone to leave the group at any time, and to respect the privacy of all. Once the memories had been shared with the collective group, and scripted as narrative, individuals were invited to surrender them to the public arena for analysis and dissemination. In many cases, this meant inserting pseudonyms, adjusting details to remove any identification or, in extreme cases where this was not possible, eliminating narratives from the research process. Such an approach meant that we accepted that we had to work within an extended process over time—a feature of CBMW that was not necessarily conducive to work commitments and research accountabilities in our institution at the time (an issue also highlighted by Cornforth, White, Milligan & Bird Claiborne, 2009).

Drawing on the inspiration of CBMW’s pioneers, in particular Haug (1992) and those who have since adapted the methodology (in particular, Davies & Gannon, 2006), CBMW was approached in our present study as an opportunity to extend our understanding of the processes of subjectification, and the ways in which each person is caught up in normative discourses and storylines and in relations of power’ (Bird Claiborne et al. 2009, p. 50). Onyx and Small (2001, drawing on Haug, 1987; see also Davies & Gannon, 2006) identify three phases for CBMW. Phase one involves the generation and documentation of individual memories and surrendering them to the collective. Phase two involves the collective examination, analysis and theorising of the memories, and phase three involves further theorising in which the insights gained are revisited in relation to the written memories, collective discussion and academic literature. These phases were used broadly as a framework in the present study, with some adaptations due to the composition of the group. In making sense of the narratives that were generated out of the workshopping of individual and collective narratives, we were heavily influenced by the following philosophical orientations:

- Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of becoming (as opposed to ‘being’)
- Butler’s (1995) notion of subjectification (as a discursive phenomenon in the lives of participants)
- Kristeva’s (1980) emphasis on physical embodiment (as an emotional, felt response to an event or act).

As Crawford et al. (1992, p. 53) explain, ‘The meanings of actions are not found in the actor’s head but in the common meanings which he or she negotiates in interactions with others’. In keeping with this notion we went beyond the precedents established in transition literature of pre-determining critical cultural or societal events or geographical shifts where transition is deemed to occur. Instead, we began by sharing memories of personal embodied experiences of transition that were generated out of dialogue within the collective group. In doing so, CBMW gave licence to a multivoiced, embodied expression of transitions by casting our minds and bodies back to remembered moments of ‘transition’ and the emotions they evoked in us.

Participants and methods

We were a group of seven early childhood education lecturers who entered the project with the intention of being collaborative researchers; each bringing a unique experiential, cultural and historical perspective. We individually responded to an email invitation to be part of a group of academics within our institution who wished to explore the potential of CBMW across a range of disciplines. The focus on transition taken by our group was generated out of dialogue, based on mutual interest in the topic for early childhood education. The composition of the group was homogeneous in gender and discipline (that is, all were female early childhood education professionals), but relatively heterogeneous in culture, age and socioeconomic backgrounds. A feature of the diversity of the group was the inclusion of indigenous Māori, Samoan and Pākehā experiences within and beyond Aotearoa/New Zealand. Since embodied memories were excavated from earliest experiences, memories drew from transitions from as far back as the 1950s.
The research process comprised three phases. Phase one took place over an intensive two-day period when each participant narrated up to three transition memories to each other. The group collectively workshops these, selecting those that resonated for all. The quest was to ‘pay attention to the embodied sense of being in the remembered moment, a truth in relation to what cannot actually be recovered—the moment as it was lived’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 3). In accord with this tenet, narratives initially constructed by individuals were shared with the collective, and words that spoke to us of an embodied state were highlighted. As such, memories were not recalled by individuals as factual accounts of events to be analysed by the group, but instead were summoned from memory as moments of transition that had resonance for all. Through the process of probing deeper, each participant was able to connect with feelings generated through the narrative, and challenge the clichés evident in our writing in order to move beyond the inhibiting nature of dominant discourses that framed our lives.

In phase two of the process, we returned to the narratives using a discourse framework for analysis. Memories crossed life spans and events, and traversed chronological and geographical spaces, yet struck an embodied collective core. This embodied resonance provided a portal from which we were able to collectively interrogate the discourses about transition inherent in our transitory lives. Davies and Gannon (2006, p. 11) describe this as being able ‘to see some of the invisible threads within which we are entangled and to make visible and open for interrogation the discourses in which we have constituted others’. Phase two therefore involved a trepidatious teasing out of embodied recollections to expose the shards of precious lives—and thereby the discourses that framed them. We posed the following questions to facilitate this ‘peeling away of the layers of material sediment in our minds’ (Haug, 1992, p. 59):

- How, if at all, does this memory speak to you? What does it bring up for you?
- What do you think this memory is about? No, what is it really about?
- What makes you think this?
- What clues are embedded in the language of the narrative?

Through dialogue and re-dialogue over an extensive period of time we interrogated the processes of subjectification (Butler, 1995), thereby unsettling our taken-for-granted assumptions and revealing new insights about the discourses that underpinned our emotive responses. At this point, some of the stories were ‘de-personalised’ or even removed if they presented an ethical risk for any of the narrators or their family members (as discussed earlier).

In phase three of the process, we returned to our core agenda of transition and its implications for early childhood education. This involved the strategic selection of narratives that most effectively conveyed the messages we sought to portray. The selections were shared with original narrators and interpretations checked to ensure that we had treated them ethically and appropriately in our writing. We then returned to the literature around transition to enable us to theorise further about the discourses at play. This paper represents a sample of our theorising.

**Findings and discussion**

Through CBMW, and attention to the embodied experience of transition, we were able to generate a range of collective memories. These were characterised by physical, sexual, cultural or relational shifts in identity as constituted through ‘other’ (either in opposition to, or in discursive agreement with) rather than through specific events. This in itself is a challenge to the taken-for-granted assumption that transition primarily involves a geographical shift between places that are deemed to be significant according to societal goals. Some of the relational shifts that comprised our transition memories were resisted or reluctantly accepted, while others were (ostensibly) approached gleefully. Embodied moments within the narratives of transition that resonated with the collective are presented in the following as related to the human experience of certainty/uncertainty, powerlessness/powerfulness, loss/gain and identity.

Each memory in the following selection reveals the socially constructed, upheld or contested nature of discourses colouring our lives, and were selected due to their poignancy in this regard. The memories re-position transition as a personal, intensely private and keenly felt experience of resistance or embracement, rather than an exclusive exercise of assimilation or cultural competence.

In the following memories, the words that signified embodied moments for us have been emphasised in bold font.

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2 Our discussions were audiotaped and minuted.
3 The research that underpinned this paper spanned two years during which time we met at three-monthly intervals for half-day discussions. It is important to note that during this period not all original contributors participated in the analysis due to career changes—a phenomenon we acknowledge as potentially risky due to the nature of the data.
Uncertainty and certainty; powerlessness and powerfulness

Our memories often resembled an emotional rollercoaster portraying a dynamic interplay between uncertainty and certainty; and powerlessness and powerfulness. They highlight the complexity and ambiguity of transitions as emotive interactions that arise out of turmoil rather than passive acceptance or assimilation. This insight challenges traditional approaches of viewing transition as an outcome that is evident only once the participant has emotionally embraced the event and made the desirable shift.

A feature that became evident through collective analysis in relation to issues of uncertainty and certainty; powerlessness and powerfulness relates to the locus of power. Some transitions occurred by personal choice while others were the result of decisions made by others. The extent to which personal choice featured in the transitions portrayed was aligned to feelings of certainty and powerfulness. Yet even when personal agency was clearly evident, feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness were simultaneously experienced.

The following narrative portrays a memory of a young adolescent girl leaving home, and represented, for us, a transition that was determined by personal choice and provoked a paradoxical blend of certainty and powerfulness alongside uncertainty; and powerfulness alongside powerlessness. We wondered if this paradox represented the very essence of transition:

stand tall and straight waiting ages for the bus. I have done it. I have escaped. I have fled the chaotic emotional mess. I will no longer have to face dramas like those of the last week. I have everything I need tucked securely away in my bag. I will get away. It doesn’t have to be this way. There are kids out there living their life alone, without adults. I know; I have read about them. I can do that too. I will keep moving, not stay in one place. I will take on a new identity, go to Wellington. The bus finally comes. I sit on the right-hand side towards the back. Suddenly as dusk creeps in I become increasingly aware of my small fragile four-foot-something frame, I feel like a tiny speck in the big empty bus. I try to make myself even more invisible by squeezing my body closer to the wall. The bus arrives at the last stop.

While the initial powerfulness of taking control is evident (through the ‘tall and straight’ stance of the author), the fragility of self in the face of uncertainty depicts the interplay between resistance of the status quo, embrace of personal power through choice and reaction to the realisation of reality. A complex interplay portrayed here in the event of a young adolescent running away from home reflects a geographical transition at a superficial level, yet when seen as an embodied phenomenon that is discursively experienced by the collective, interpretation shifts more strongly to taking and losing control of one’s actions. This loss is conveyed in the embodied experience of powerlessness as the ‘tiny speck’ who desires total anonymity within the discourse from which she seeks escape.

While several memories reflected the more commonplace assumption of transition being primarily about moving into another state, some memories were more clearly focused on moving out of a particular state. Very often when the latter was the case, the locus of power shifted from personal choice to imposed choice and, as a consequence, led to a deep feeling of loss. The following memory captures the pain and uncertainty that can be experienced when one has no part in the decision making relating to the transition. In the narrative that follows a small child finds herself on a plane, unaware of the decision her parents have made for some of the aiga4 to migrate from Samoa to New Zealand. The transition entailed leaving loved family members behind and was compounded by a lack of information in the moment. Each of us could connect with this memory and recognised the significant impact of similarly imposed transitions in our lives.

They put a new dress on me and then we left on the flying machine to go to New Zealand. I don’t know what is happening; there are so many new faces on this strange aircraft. I sit next to my mother, she holds my baby brother in her arms, but where is my older sister, my best friend? I look around and everything is alien to me, except my family members, those that I can see. A strange white-skinned woman approaches me with a basket of lollies. I’ve never seen so many lollies before in my life and my eyeballs just about pop out because I know these are good to eat. My mother tells me that I must go with the palagi lady to give out the sweets. I smile my first smile on this new journey. I don’t care about the lollies, this will be my opportunity to go and look for my big sister. I know she’s here somewhere on this aircraft; she’s playing hide and seek with me again. I stand up, I begin to look, I look, and look, and look and I cannot find her. Where is my sister? What will I do without her?

The child in this narrative did not know that her sister had been left behind in their home country. Her need to find her sister caused her to take action and through this she fleetingly experienced a sense of powerfulness, working out her own solution. An aspect that stands out in this story is the lack of forewarning and the lack of information provided. The child had no chance to adjust or begin to reframe herself within the context of this transitory uplifting—as evidenced in the embodied descriptions of ‘I begin to look, I look, and look and

4 Aiga is the Samoan term for family.
5 Palagi is a Samoan term for a person of European descent.
look’. The socially constructed belief that underpins this memory is that the ‘palagi’ lady with the sweets knows best—a colonial myth that does not fool this narrator. Although assimilation to palagi society in New Zealand could be deemed to be a ‘success’, it is not without resistance, pain and loss for the author. During our analysis of this memory we experienced resonance with associated feelings of panic or uncertainty at the hands of those who are positioned by well-meaning adults as trustworthy ‘other’. Embodied feelings of betrayal were generated for us as we considered the long-term impacts of being moved outside of a relational space—which is comfortable and safe—into the unknown.

In the following narrative, more powerful than the geographical shift being experienced by the child are the strong feelings evoked of not being good enough to make the socially determined transition to the next grade. Here, a five-year-old girl is ‘promoted’ from the comforting familiarity of her new entrant classroom to the new grade:

Where am I going? I am not sure why I am being moved. Entering the new classroom and positioned on the mat I look around, not recognising any of the faces. The class continues on around me and I am expected to stay and join in. The song ABC is sung—what is this, I have not heard it before and I can’t join in. The others seem so clever and confident. I wish I could crawl away and go back up the hill to my old room. Other songs follow that are unfamiliar. I feel small and backward, my crossed legs are locked and rigid as I keep my eyes on the floor hoping no-one has noticed me.

Magnified by a lack of familiarity with the new classroom and not knowing the coveted rituals of rote-learned ABC chants, equilibrium is disrupted and emotional stability disturbed. There is no level playing field when it comes to a transition of this nature, since the transitory markers are predetermined. Transition has occurred nonetheless and there is no going back. The embodied experience of ‘locked and rigid’ legs speaks of immobility and frozen hope as the child is offered no choice about the events that confront her and her subjectified self at the back of classroom activity.

In summary, our experiences of uncertainty and being powerful or powerless related to the level or amount of control, knowledge or familiarity that we felt. The repeated desire to disappear, to be unnoticed or to escape suggests that imposed transitions or those that represent a form of escape can be experienced as minimising. The traumatic nature of such transition suggests that, though some learning about the new environment has occurred, it is not necessarily empowering or enhancing and may indeed represent a potential shutting down of the self as the only tangible means of delivery in the powerless state the discourse has prescribed. This insight led us to consider what might be the implications of such transitions for children who do not openly resist imposed transitions or, conversely, those who do.

Loss and gain

A sense of loss or gain being encountered when one was moving into or out of a socially constructed group featured in several of our narratives. Although moving in or out of groupings was often embraced willingly as a means of successfully assimilating into a chosen society, it was frequently accompanied by concurrent feelings of loss and gain. Several memories were told in this vein and magnified the extent to which participants recognised that ‘fitting in’ to the expected norms of society comprised a complex and paradoxical transition.

The dominant discourse of successful transition as ‘fitting in’ to a chosen societal group or way of being is reflected in the following narrative. Here, a girl brings home a glowing report card after a succession of reports indicating lack of effort and generating familial disapproval. The narrative also illustrates the tension of seeking acceptance through buying into societal norms even though they are not personally rewarding:

She turns sharply in the drive. The bike tyres smell rubbery from the furious ride home. ‘Mum!’ she calls. In her bag is a ticket—a ticket out of purgatory. ‘Come and look at my report!’ she cries and thrusts the carefully folded white paper, in this place like gold, into her mother’s hands. A silence is kept as the mother reads. She watches her eyes scan down the page, up the page, down the page. Moist eyes look up as the mother says, ‘I don’t believe it’ and sinks to the ground. No more words need saying, only lots of wetness and warmth as the girl hears those long-awaited words: ‘I’m proud of you’.

This story provoked both a sense of loss and gain since the narrative does not suggest any elation from the narrator’s point of view. The phrase ‘escape from purgatory’ suggests that the gain was won in order to seek the approval (or re-approval) of the adult and thereby entry into the socially acceptable group of ‘educational achievers’ rather than any intrinsic joy in the purported success. Academic achievement—‘like gold’—represents currency and associated acceptance into a state of relational approval rather than any scholarly pursuit. In this narrative, there is a sense of power whereby the child utilises the discourse rather than succumbing to it totally. In early childhood education practice, similar use of written assessment genres (albeit less aligned to report cards than other forms of documented assessment) are employed as a marker of success that may or may not be of significance to the child or the parent (White, 2009).
Memories that provoked an embodied experience of loss and gain tended to relate to associations with particular societal groups. This made us reflect on how different groups or cultures are positioned in different societies. In the following story, the pleasure of having just turned 50 in a ‘fabulous’ manner was confronted with the subjectification of middle-aged women, by the narrator’s own hand, in considering what it means to reach the cultural milestone of turning 50. Here she has positioned herself outside of the discourse in order to resist the imposed framework of youthful beauty and appeal (embodied in the description of ‘old ducks’) and yet simultaneously becomes entrapped by the discourse that suggests she now ‘qualifies’.

I’m sorry but you will have to read the timetable out to me because I don’t have my glasses,’ I say to the young man behind the counter. He reads out the classes. ‘Regular Aqua Fitness, Tuesday evenings at seven; Swim Fit, Wednesday evenings at six, and on Friday morning,’ he says, ‘The Fifties Forward Aqua Fitness class at 9.30.’ I laugh loudly. Wow I qualify! I’ve just turned 50 fabulously. But in this moment it feels as if there is a large incongruity between how I actually feel and my sudden qualification for Fifties Forward. I imagine myself doing the low-impact work out in the Aqua Fitness class with all those old ducks that I see at the pool in the mornings. Oh my god!

We were captured by this narrative and its generated meaning because it seemed to present to us a paradox in our lives. On the one hand, we celebrate desirable transitions of movement onwards and upwards but, on the other, we reject the associated ageing process. Success in reaching 50 is framed around not looking and acting 50. The construct is compelling, since it seemed to us that it raises the issue of how transition is constructed by the individual, influenced by the discourses that surround it, and its associated impact on the significance of that transition on our lives.

Identity

Inherent in our responses to all the narratives was a sense of our ongoing constructions of identity through the transitions. In these transitory moments, we recognised that there were often some rituals or societal rites of passage, through which people perceived they must pass, that contributed to our constructions of self as members of a group or culture. Often these memories were joyfully embraced—associated with achieving or conforming to socially valued milestones or cultural constructs. However, these same memories could have a dark side, involving some degree of humiliation or pain when hard won. In these cases, the transitions created a tension between our self-identification and the way others saw us. As a result, our constructions of self had the potential to become limiting, socially constructed discourses of subjectification. This revelation provoked our consideration of the emphasis placed on making ‘successful’ transitions in early childhood education and what this rhetoric reveals.

In the following memory, a young Māori schoolgirl struggles to participate in a Māori language class. There is a sense of humiliation because the narrator does not feel competent in the language of her home culture. Here she recognises her own incompetence and, in later discussion, revealed that this was the transitory moment that marked her shift towards wanting to become culturally competent. This, she saw, would afford her entry into what she perceived as the privileged status of tangata whenua:

My hands were sweating and my heart was thumping so loud, I felt like everyone could see how nervous I was about trying to say a sentence in Māori. Kei hea koe i te Hatarei? I knew that meant where was I on Saturday. I tried to rack my brain to try and say where I was. At home, at home, how do I say at home in Māori? Oh no, it’s my turn, oh no, how do I say I was at home? It was my turn, I felt so scared inside, I felt the blood rush to my head as I blurted out: ‘Kei te homo’. There was a roar of laughter as I sank back into my chair and tried to hide.

Kei te homo was the girl’s attempt at a transliteration for a word she did not know and the laughter was possibly because of the unintended homophone. This memory provoked, for us, a sense of intentionally, if unsuccessfully, claiming an identity that was historically and culturally determined. In this case, the identity was deliberately and strategically sought. In other cases, the re-framing of identity was not sought but, instead, foisted upon us.

In the following memory, the narrator reveals her disrupted subjectivity—shaken by the receipt of a phone call that, in a moment, changes her life forever. In grappling with this embodied moment of transition, we could not ignore the multiple moments that had preempted the narrator’s response. This memory highlights for us the point that, while transition may be framed as an isolated event, transitions can be represented as a culmination of events built up over time that together constitute and reconstitute identity:

I feel sick. My stomach churns and my feet are stuck to the floor. My sweaty palm grips the phone harder. I hear his words but I can’t comprehend them. Anger wells up inside me and rises in my brain, filling every space. How can things change so quickly? Only six weeks ago I was in control; emerging from a mutually agreed

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6 Tangata whenua are the indigenous Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand and treaty partners of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
Considerations

The knowledge and understandings about transition that have been gained from CBMW exceed any singular academic or theoretical knowledge that we may have had before the process. There is no doubt that there is still relevance in paying attention to the traditional constructs of transition, such as socially and culturally determined markers and geographical shifts (e.g. Dalli, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dockett & Perry 2002; Fabian, 2002; Ledger et al., 2000). Yet through CBMW we have come to appreciate the primary significance of viewing transition as an intensely private and keenly felt emotional experience which, from an early childhood perspective, teachers and parents ignore at their peril. We suggest, therefore, that CBMW offers a way of entering into the experience of ‘other’—in this case, the experiences of early childhood that are frequently inaccessible, irretrievable, unsought or unrecognised. Small (2007, p. 8) also recognises the benefits of CBMW in making accessible diverse memoried voices in ways that are less evident in methodologies that are seen as ‘ostensibly objective and rigorous’.

Although our narratives are not exclusively located in early childhood, the intent of CBMW to move beyond the memory provided us with the opportunity to explore our emotional responses and the discourses around transition that had influenced our lived experiences across our life spans. We thought that by gaining insights into what our various experiences of transitions revealed about how we saw ourselves and others, we could also consider how these might impact on young children as they transition into, within and from early childhood education settings. The extremely powerful emotional responses that emerged for us through this study have convinced us that all the memories, not just those from early childhood, can contribute to a better understanding of how teachers and families can support young children’s transitions by tentatively stepping into the shoes of another.

Sharing transition memories through CBMW methodology, then, enabled us to become deeply in tune with the discursive nature of transition in our daily lives. CBMW highlights the potential value in exploring embodied responses to experiences which, though not the same, are able to provoke similar feelings which can support adults to better appreciate the experience of a child. We now recognise transitions as imposed, reflected and/or rejected discourses that construct and reconstruct identity throughout our lives. The way people feel is critical and it is our contention that, while knowledge and preparation offered to children by well-meaning adults are important, they are insufficient without an appreciation of and attunement with the emotional elements of transition.

We believe that the insights we have gained around uncertainty/certainty, powerlessness/powerfulness, loss/gain and identity could provide the impetus for early childhood teachers to reconsider their understandings of transition in relation to children, families and their own practices. We now recognise that the extent to which there is choice and power will have a marked impact on the way transition, and ultimately the ‘self’, will be constituted, envisioned and experienced. This is also highlighted in the Mangere Bridge Centre of Innovation research (Hartley et al., 2010). Our CBMW revealed that many traditional milestone markers are imposed and, in themselves, may not be valued by the person who is required to make the shift. We also recognise that some transitions may contribute to a process of un-learning rather than increased learning. As a result, we suggest that teachers and parents cannot assume that children who appear to shift from one setting to another without any problems are more successful in the transition than those who actively or passively resist. Transition does not always represent competency and may, in fact, be recognised as a move away from competency to powerlessness and fear. Therefore, teachers need to recognise the cultural capital—as currency—children bring to transitions since we now understand that transition is a discursively experienced phenomenon (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Peters et al., 2009).

Our theorising has led us to believe that transition is seldom defined in one moment of time but influenced by multiple moments over time. As such, teachers and parents cannot predetermine transition experiences for children in a generic manner. Seen as embodied experience within a collective, transitions can be reviewed as highly complex, paradoxical relational shifts. As a result, it is necessary for adults to consider that any moment may constitute transition since one cannot pinpoint what will be significant for another. This broader view will encourage a shift away from viewing transition as a learning outcome or milestone that can be achieved and ‘ticked off’ and frame it more effectively as an ongoing process. Such a view behoves teachers and parents to pay careful attention to the embodied cues to meaning offered in subtle gestural nuances as well as speech. It is here that clues to what really constitutes transition for the individual child might be found.
References


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What will my teacher be like? Picture storybooks about starting school

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CHILDREN LEARN A GREAT DEAL about school, what happens at school, and the people they will meet at school as they engage with popular culture, such as television, games and books. One of the issues raised by many children as they contemplate starting school concerns what their teacher will be like. Children’s expectations about teachers are important contributors to the relationships that develop between teachers and children. Such relationships are themselves a critical factor in children’s school engagement. Examining some of the information that contributes to children’s expectations about teachers supports a focus on children’s experiences as they start school.

This article reports a study of the images of teachers within children's picture storybooks—an accessible form of popular culture about school. A collection of 164 English language picture storybooks spanning 1967–2007 was analysed to explore the representations of teachers in schools. Three areas of analysis were undertaken: how teachers are represented; the dominant images of teachers; and the images that are omitted. The analysis demonstrates the generally benign images of teachers and questions the understandings the books promote about teachers and the roles of teachers in schools.

Introduction

One of the sources of children’s knowledge about school is popular culture, which can provide a resource for children to learn about specific communities (such as school) and their roles and relationships within these communities (Haas Dyson, 1997). Weber and Mitchell (1995, p. 2) note the pervasiveness of popular culture images of school: ‘Even before children begin school, they have already been exposed to a myriad of images of teachers, classrooms and schools which have made strong and lasting impressions on them’. Once they start school, children’s own experiences of education, along with those encountered through popular culture (Hickey & Austin, 2006) contribute to the public text of ‘teacher’ (Mockler, 2004).

Young children encounter popular culture in many contexts, such as conversations, play, television, movies, computer games, advertising and children’s literature. One of the most common strategies used by educators and families to help children become familiar with school has engaged popular culture in the form of children’s books about school. Part of the rationale for this approach draws from the view that children’s literature can serve as a catalyst, promoting conversations that both encourage children to share what they know and to voice concerns they may have about school (Triplett & Ash, 2000).

We are wary of assuming that specific forms of social discourse—such as those associated with teachers and teaching—derive solely from the reading of a specific text or texts. Rather, we recognise that social discourse is complex and there is not a simple, causal connection between discourse and social attitudes (Mockler, 2004). When children are engaged in multiple readings and ongoing conversations with others about schools and teachers, they are likely to build up specific expectations that incorporate some of these readings and conversations. Weber and Mitchell (1995; 1999) refer to this as a process of constructing cumulative cultural texts, where images from the past (such as those of parents, siblings, friends) are combined with those of the present (including those in popular culture) to ‘give members of a society a common frame of reference and a shared pool of expressive images to
use’ that ‘blend seamlessly and often undetected into our familiar, unquestioned everyday knowledge’ (Weber & Mitchell, 1999, p. 168). Children starting school encounter and engage with a variety of popular culture images of teachers. These images can help shape how children think about teachers at school and their own identity as school students, influencing ‘relations and representations of self with and within the wider community’ (Beavis, 2000, p. 1).

The importance of the teacher

Children starting school are eager to know who their teacher will be and what they will be like (Potter & Briggs, 2003). Some children have concerns that their teacher will be mean and that, consequently, school will not be a pleasant place. For example, Clarke and Sharp (2003, p. 20) report Singaporean children’s concerns that the teacher ‘might be very fierce’ and Brostrom (1998) reports the concerns of Swedish children that their teacher will be authoritarian; constantly issuing commands and directions. In Australian studies, knowing who the teacher will be and what the future teacher will be like remain important issues for children as they start school (Dockett & Perry, 2005).

The nature of relationships between children and their teacher is a critical factor in children’s successful school trajectories. Teachers who are warm, caring and responsive to individual children—described by Hamre and Pianta (2007) as sensitive teachers—have the potential to create learning environments where children feel valued, safe and encouraged to learn. In studies investigating images of teachers, this description constitutes a ‘relational’ (Triplett & Ash, 2000) or ‘positive’ teacher (Sandefur & Moore, 2004). Pianta (1998, p. 17) emphasised the importance of positive teacher–child relationships, noting that ‘child competence is often embedded in and a property of relationships with adults’ and that such relationships can shape children’s engagement with, and therefore future success at, school. One of the bases for establishing positive relationships is the expectation—from children as well as teachers—that such relationships are a part of school life.

Images of teachers in picture storybooks

It has been argued that narrative texts serve as ‘mirrors and windows’ (Cullinan & Galda, 1998) and that ‘children’s perceptions of the teaching profession are subtly shaped’ by what they encounter in books about school (Trousdale, 1994, p. 213). Several studies have investigated the representation of teachers and schools in children’s literature. Notable among these are Greenway’s (1993) focus on negative images of school; Barone, Meyerson and Mallette’s (1995) identification of positive and negative images of teachers; Radencich and Harrison’s (1997) images of principals; and Trousdale’s (1994) analysis of teachers in picture books.

Picture books are one form of children’s literature used regularly by parents and educators in their interactions with young children. Temple, Martinez, Yokoto and Naylor (1998) define three types of picture books: wordless picture books, where the illustrations tell the story; picture storybooks, where the illustrations and text together tell the story; and illustrated books, which rely mainly on the text to tell the story. This discussion focuses on picture storybooks, recognising the importance of illustrations to young children (Evans & Sainty-Aubin, 2005).

While a wide range of images of teachers in picture storybooks is noted by Sandefur and Moore (2004, p. 42), not many of these are noted as positive, with teachers represented as ‘at best, kind but uninspiring and at worst, roadblocks to be torn down in order that children may move forward successfully’. Reflecting the notion of cumulative cultural texts (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Weber & Mitchell, 1999), Sandefur and Moore (2004, p. 43) recognise that ‘these representations become subsumed into the collective consciousness of a society and shape expectations and behaviours of both students and teachers’.

Sandefur and Moore’s (2004) analysis focused on picture storybooks generally, rather than only those about starting school. Overwhelmingly, teachers were portrayed as white, female, and generally not particularly competent in managing the classroom. A minority of teachers was portrayed as sensitive and competent. Most teachers were described as one-dimensional and static. Very few teachers were considered to inspire children’s learning, and several teachers were portrayed as unwilling to intervene in situations such as teasing. In a similar vein, Barone et al. (1995) described the polarisation of teacher representations—teachers were represented as either valued members of society, or as inept fools. Triplett and Ash (2000) also identified representations of teachers along two dimensions: relational (concerned with developing positive relationships with children) as opposed to non-relational (seeking no personal connection with children); and ethical rebels (challenging rules for the benefit of children) as opposed to non-ethical rebels (challenging rules for their own benefit). The transitional teacher—moving from one to the other of these positions in either dimension—was reported to be rare, particularly in literature for young children.

Given the prevalence of these images across the genre of picture storybooks, we were interested in the nature of images in books that seek to introduce children to school and to teachers and the possible contributions of these to children’s expectations of the teachers they
would meet at school. This paper reports a project investigating the images of teachers in children’s picture storybooks about starting school. It has its origins in our ongoing investigation of the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007) and the recognition that most transition-to-school programs include activities where children read, or are read, books about starting school. In considering the books used in transition programs, we sought answers to the following questions:

1. How are teachers represented in the books?
2. What are the dominant images of teachers in these books?
3. What images are missing from the books?

**Methodology**

This study involved the analysis of a wide range of picture storybooks. One hundred and sixty-four books about starting school provided the data sample. These books were located through bookshops, recommendations from parents or teachers, and through library searches. The picture storybooks studied were sourced from Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America (USA), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and Singapore. Their publication spans a period of 40 years: 1967–2007. They encompass those regarded as ‘classics’—such as Cohen’s (1967) *Will I have a friend?*—as well as others that are contemporary—such as Whybrow and Reynolds’ (2006) *Harry and the dinosaurs go to school*. The availability of the books, rather than their literary merit, was the initial criterion for inclusion in the study.

From the initial sample, 22 books were identified that did not include school or a substantial role relating to an adult educator. These books included *My friend Harry* (Lewis, 1995) and *The kissing hand* (Penn, 1993) which focus on issues such as parent–child separation or separation from a comfort object when starting school, rather than school life itself. These books were not included in further analysis.

Content analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) of the remaining 142 books involved multiple readings by the authors, focus on the ways in which different elements of the book contributed to the meanings constructed, and the awareness that the data itself was a co-construction, with our interpretations impacting on what we identified and this, in turn, impacting on the data generated. Throughout the multiple readings, we noted the representations of teachers—including names, gender, diversity, language, appearance, location, mode of interaction—as well as the absence of such data; for example, the lack of names for teachers and modes of interaction that were not included. In keeping with Triplett and Ash (2000), our definition of teacher included adult educators within school contexts. This meant that principals, librarians, aides, counsellors and other adult educators were included in the analysis.

The unit of analysis across the books was the teacher as depicted by visual images and/or accompanying text. Where multiple teachers were evident in books, each different teacher was analysed. Where a teacher appeared on more than one occasion, the illustrations and text related to that one teacher across the contexts were coded as one instance. Coding was undertaken by two independent researchers, utilising both pre-existing categories identified from previous studies (Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Triplett & Ash, 2000), and identifying other emergent themes from the data. Interrater reliability for coding was 98%.

In order to address the overall research questions, the following questions were used to generate categories within the content analysis:

1. How are teachers represented in the books?
   - What is the teacher’s name?
   - What is the teacher’s gender?
   - What is the cultural background of the teacher? Can this be determined?
   - What is the physical representation of the teacher?
   - What is the appearance of the teacher?

2. What are the dominant images of teachers in these books?
   - What are the roles of the teacher?
   - Does the teacher work to build positive relationships with the children?
   - Does the teacher challenge the rules or parameters of school? If so, who benefits from this?
   - Is there evidence of change in the teacher within the book?
   - What evidence is there of power relationships? With whom?

3. What images are missing from the books?
   - What representations are missing?
   - Are teachers presented as learners?
   - Do teachers critically engage their students?
Teachers were female rather than the number of books. The majority of the discussion we refer to the total number of teachers (187), in the 142 books analysed. In presenting results and discussion we refer to the total number of teachers (187), although a substantial proportion (n = 80; 43%) remained nameless. As reported by Triplet and Ash (2000), the teacher’s name was often a clue to their personality or style of interaction. Examples include Miss Twinkle (Chrysanthemum, Henkes, 1991), Mr Chase (I am not going to school today, Harris, 2003) and Ms Sugarman (Kindergarten rocks!, Davis, 2005).

The most striking example of the nameless (and faceless) teacher appears in David goes to school (Shannon, 1999), where David is consistently chastised for breaking the rules of school. Some books reflected the fears of children that the teacher would be a monster; for example, Kate’s concern in I don’t want to go to school (Harris & Smith, 2001, pp. 5–6) ‘about what the teacher would be like’ is accompanied by a teacher portrayed as a dragon.

The majority of teachers represented were female. While this does reflect the gender of primary teachers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005), several of these images were similar to those described by Weber and Mitchell (1995, pp. 44–45), reflecting a certain “kind” of female … long skirts, with their hair pinned back in severe buns, evoking the stereotype of an “old maid”. Despite the presence of these images, there was no clear physical stereotype of female teacher in the sample for this study. Images of female teachers covered a range of ages, appearances and modes of dress.

One feature of teacher representations consistent with previous analyses (Trousdale, 1994) was that teachers, particularly female teachers, smiled a lot. For example, the following text from My first day of school (Hallinan, 1987, p. 10) is matched with an image of a smiling teacher:

And our teacher just smiles
And talked with such care
That all of our fears
Disappeared into air.

Results and discussion

Table 1. Teacher characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number (n = 187)</th>
<th>Percentage (of 187)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Anglo-Celtic appearance</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers with a name</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Teacher roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher role</th>
<th>Number (n = 187)</th>
<th>Percentage (of 187)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as classroom manager</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as disciplinarian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as pedagogue</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as nurturer</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational teachers</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers exercising power</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Multiple roles are possible

How are teachers represented in the texts?

One hundred and eighty-seven teachers were represented in the 142 books analysed. In presenting results and discussion we refer to the total number of teachers (187), rather than the number of books. The majority of the teachers were female (n = 144; 77%), of white, Anglo-Celtic appearance (n = 140; 75%) (Table 1). Most of the teachers had a name (n = 107; 57%), though a substantial proportion (n = 80; 43%) remained nameless. As reported by Triplet and Ash (2000), the teacher’s name was often a clue to their personality or style of interaction. Examples include Miss Twinkle (Chrysanthemum, Henkes, 1991), Mr Chase (I am not going to school today, Harris, 2003) and Ms Sugarman (Kindergarten rocks!, Davis, 2005).

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And talked with such care
That all of our fears
Disappeared into air.

What are the dominant images of teachers in these books?

Teacher roles

Four major roles were identified in the analysis. These and relevant frequencies are listed in Table 2.

Teacher as classroom manager. The most common role identified for teachers was that of classroom manager. This included greeting children and families, setting up resources, making equipment available and cleaning up. Examples include Miss Posy, the teacher in Off to school, Baby Duck (Hest, 1999), who greets families at the classroom door and offers some words of encouragement for both parents and children and Miss Bindergarten in Miss Bindergarten gets ready for kindergarten (Slate, 1996), who sets up the classroom, tidies up and decorates the room before the children arrive for their first day at school. As classroom manager, the teacher supervises play, gives directions to children—often about where to put their belongings—and, on rare occasions, helps to solve conflict.

Teacher as disciplinarian. Fourteen per cent (n = 27) of the teachers in these books focus on the rules of school and the consequences of breaking these. For example, Miss Ping (Tom’s first day at school, Robbins, 2001) explains the rule that ‘You must not play with balls indoors’ and when this rule is broken, she tells Lionel, ‘I’ll hold on to this … you can have it back after school’. There are clear messages that rules are important, teachers have the power to impose rules and consequences, and children have no power to respond. Mrs Sarmiento (Sam and Gram and the first day of school, Blomberg, 1999) also reminds children of the rules when she ‘walked down the line and showed each child how to stand side-by-side with a partner’.

Teacher as pedagogue. Forty-nine per cent (n = 91) of teacher images reflected their engagement in teaching and learning activities. The most frequent activity involved the teacher reading to children (n = 40; 21%).
Reading was portrayed as a positive and powerful process. However, it was noticeable that teachers were generally the ones to read, while children listened. Some teachers (n = 16; 9%) were also portrayed singing, or playing the piano or guitar. Once again, teachers led this interaction.

Teachers were rarely portrayed as playing with children. An exception is Ms Manoli in First day (Wild, 1998), who is depicted leading a dance and playing with children both indoors and out. Supervising play (part of the role of teacher as classroom manager) was more common than teachers actually playing with children.

While teachers were engaged in teaching and learning activities, the nature of the pedagogy underpinning this engagement was not often clear. For example, some teachers were standing at the front of the classroom, directing children’s attention to a board. Others were depicted sitting with or near children as the children engaged in art, reading, construction or play activities. Only in a small number of instances were teachers portrayed as supporting children as they engaged in challenging intellectual pursuits. One example was the teacher in Quetzal and the cool school (Anderson, 2000) who encouraged children to build on what they could already do.

Mrs Candy (Our class, Impey & Porter, 2001) was one of the few examples where there was an explicit focus on learning in a play-based classroom.

**Teacher as nurturer.** Twenty-five per cent (n = 47) of teachers were depicted as providing some form of support or comfort. Typically, the teacher in these instances was shown comforting upset children, reassuring them as they entered school for the first time, helping children dress themselves or providing food. An example is Here we go round the mulberry bush (Hillenbrand, 2003), where the teacher serves biscuits that she has made for a snack.

**Relational teachers**

Some teachers demonstrated concern for children in both academic and personal spheres. Triplett and Ash (2000) have labelled these as ‘relational’ teachers. In contrast, non-relational teachers are described as seeking ‘no personal relationship with students, are either passive or active in their lack of relating’ (Triplett & Ash, 2000, pp. 245–246). The majority (n = 123; 66%) of teachers in the current analysis were coded as non-relational. These teachers went about the business of teaching without connecting on a personal level with the children. Examples include Mrs Chud in Chrysanthemum (Henkes, 1991), who recognised Chrysanthemum’s distress at being teased, but did not act to resolve it.

The remaining 64 teachers (34%) did show some personal connection with children, including holding hands with children in the playground, having children sit on their knee, hugging children (First day, Wild, 1998) and demonstrating empathy (Painted words, Brandenberg, 1998). Some books have addressed issues associated with children starting life in a new country as well as starting school. Several of these provide images of teachers committed to building positive relationships with these children and between the children and their classmates. The name jar (Choi, 2001) is one example.

**Teachers challenging the rules**

Throughout the books, there were no clear examples of teachers who overtly challenged the rules, either to benefit themselves or others. There were, however, examples of teachers who engaged in behaviour such as singing and dancing with the children, (Ms Manoli in First day, Wild, 1998) and playing with children (Mrs Hippo in Time for school, Steer, 1997). While not necessarily challenging the rules, this behaviour is in marked contrast to the majority of teachers in these books, who remain very much in a position of control (usually at the front of the class).

**Transitions in teacher images**

In their analysis of images of teachers, Triplett and Ash (2000) noted limited instances where teachers appeared to make a transition, usually from a non-relational to a relational teacher. While this trend was rare, it was possible to identify a few instances where the initial representation of the teacher was one of disconnection with children, but where this changed during the course of the book. For example, the teacher in My name is Yoon (Recorvits, 2003) seems initially distant from Yoon. However, as child and teacher get to know each other, a strong relationship builds. More common is the transition in children’s expectations, moving from anxiety that their teacher will be a monster, to the pleasant reality that the teacher is friendly after all. Examples include I don’t want to go to school (Harris & Smith, 2001) and Spider school, (Simon, 1996).

**Teacher effectiveness**

In the majority of the books, teachers were seen to be effective in helping children to feel at ease at school. In Tom goes to kindergarten (Wild & Legge, 1999), school turns out to be such good fun that the whole family stays. Teacher effectiveness in terms of engaging children in meaningful curriculum was not evident in many books, though it is noted that these books focus on starting school, where social and emotional connections are particularly important (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Mrs Candy (Our class, Impey & Porter, 2001), remains a strong example of a teacher who connected socially with the children in her class and promoted engagement in a wide range of learning experiences.
In some instances, teacher ineffectiveness was illustrated. The unnamed teacher in *We share everything* (Munsch, 1999) appeared angel-like (with wings) as she tried to resolve conflict between Amanda and Jeremiah by reciting her kindergarten mantra, ‘In kindergarten, we share. We share everything’. Her efforts to resolve conflict were superficial and it is clear at the end of the book that the power relations between teacher and children had shifted when the two protagonists are seen to have taken her rule to heart, swapped clothes and explained that ‘In kindergarten we share. We share everything’. This representation of the teacher is the nearest example to Trousdale’s (1994) teacher as buffoon found across the books. It represents a teacher unable to effectively resolve conflict while the children resolve the situation themselves.

**Teachers and power**

Situations that reflected teachers’ power and use of power with children were identified for 67 (36%) teachers. Power relationships are represented in several ways in this selection of books. Power is implied in the positioning of teachers—whether the teacher is located at the front of the classroom or sitting at a desk, or as the active participant in reading experiences. Children, sitting and listening to the teacher, tend to be represented as passive.

The power of the teacher to praise and reward is central to several books, including *Meet the Barkers: Morgan and Moffat go to school* (de Paola, 2001) and *Little Miss Spider at Sunny Patch School* (Kirk, 2000), where after one day at school Little Miss Spider laments:

> The school day was over.
> They sounded the bell.
> She sobbed, ‘Is there anything I can do well?’

Few books suggest that children are in a position to challenge the power of the teacher. One example is Munsch’s *We share everything* (1999), where the children use the teacher’s mantra to shift assumed power. Another is *The twelve days of kindergarten* (Rose, 2003) which shows the teacher becoming progressively frazzled as the children take on tasks and activities in unexpected ways. By the final pages, the teacher is shown pulling her hair out, and then being comforted by children who declare, ‘We love school’.

There were 10 teachers shown in power relationships with parents. One example is *The night before kindergarten* (Wing, 2001), where parents are represented waiting at the classroom door, unable to enter until the teacher gives permission. At the end of the day, the teacher, Miss Sunrise, finally invited the parents into the classroom, as she ‘gathered the grown-ups on the magical rug, then sent them away after one final hug’. Another example comes from *Bye, bye* (Kaufman, 2003), where the teacher stands and points to the door, with the text explaining, ‘Oh, no! Teacher says you really have to go, Daddy!’

The majority of teachers were women who undertook a number of functions related to managing the classroom, acting as disciplinarians, pedagogues and nurturers. The description seems remarkably similar to the ‘nice ladies who love children’ image described by Stonehouse (1994). Despite the identification of the role of teacher as nurturer, a minority of teachers were represented as relational, or regarded as building social and emotional, as well as academic, connections with children.

**What images are missing?**

**Gender**

Forty-three (23%) of the teachers depicted were male (Table 1). This included several who were identified as principals and specialist teachers. The male classroom teachers in these books were represented as caring and fun to be with. For example, Mr Chase, in *I am not going to school today* (Harris, 2003), tells children that they will play and sing at lot at school. While male teachers were represented as promoting fun at school, they were not depicted as smiling nearly as often as female teachers. Trousdale (1994, p. 207) notes that the smiling face of the teacher ‘indicates good will ... [and it] also signifies a lack of threat that may be interpreted as a submissive attitude, a desire to please. Why do the male teachers not need to smile so continuously?’

**Diversity**

As in other analyses of children’s books, there is a general lack of cultural and linguistic diversity represented across these teachers (Gemma, 2001; Smith-D’Arezzo, 2003). Seventy-five per cent (n = 140) of teachers reflected a white, Anglo-Celtic background. The names attributed to teachers confirm this predominance. Of major concern here is the representation of teachers as largely monocultural, where mainstream culture prevails and tensions do not arise. Gemma (2001) reports a similar finding in her analysis of North American books, noting that few ‘address many important linguistic, religious, and cultural issues and questions faced by children and teachers’ (p. 75). The omission of specific groups of people from picture storybooks, particularly in the powerful role of teacher, generates messages about who belongs at school and who is likely to succeed at school (Mendoza & Reese, 2002). One of the books that reflects and celebrates diversity among both teachers and children is *Cleversticks* (Ashley, 1992).

**Teachers as learners**

In the majority of books, teachers were represented as the keepers of knowledge. This was conveyed through images of teachers leading reading activities, providing
directions and assisting children as they undertake tasks. Only on rare occasions was the teacher represented as a learner. These included Mrs Dhanjal and Ms Smith (Cleversticks, Ashley, 1992), who learnt about the special attributes of the children in their class, and Mr Owl (Franklin goes to school, Bourgeois & Clark, 1995), who responded positively to Franklin’s interests and indicated that Franklin had taught him something as well.

Teachers engaging children in critical thinking
The role of teacher as pedagogue does not often extend to engaging children in critical thinking or deep learning. Overall, a minority of teachers (n = 5; 3%) were depicted asking pedagogical questions. This may be because the focus of these books is the first day, and the sense of comforting and reassuring new children predominates. One of the few teachers who asked a lot of questions was Ms Shephard in Meet the Barkers: Morgan and Moffat go to school (de Paola, 2001).

Teachers resolving conflict
Only two teachers were shown resolving conflict, or potential conflict, at school. One of these was Miss Twinkle, the music teacher in Chrysanthemum (Henkes, 1991), who acted to stop teasing. Chrysanthemum’s classroom teacher, Mrs Chud, acknowledged the difficulties Chrysanthemum was having when other children teased her about her name, yet did little to resolve this:

…Victoria raised her hand and said,

‘A chrysanthemum is a flower. It lives in a garden with worms and other dirty things’.

‘Thank you for sharing that with us, Victoria’, said Mrs Chud.

‘Now put your hand down’.

Avoidance of conflict, or the implication that it can be easily overcome, was evident in several books. For example, Mrs Jenkins, the teacher in Timothy’s tales from Hilltop School (Wells, 2002), acknowledged potential conflict and responded on each occasion with a song. When children were not sharing, there was the Take Turns song, and when children were teasing others, there was the Friendly song.

Conclusion
The images depicted in the books analysed reflected predominantly female teachers from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. While one of the major roles for teachers was that of classroom manager, there was relatively little evidence of teachers effectively engaging with children in critical or deep thinking, or of resolving conflict effectively. Relational teachers who made personal connections with children were identified in less than 50% of the images. Sandefur and Moore (2004) noted in their analyses that teachers were represented as ‘static, unchanging and flat … never shown as learners themselves’ (p. 48). They, along with Barone et al. (1995), reported polarised images of teachers as inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. The results of this study concur with the first point, in that teachers were generally presented as static, one-dimensional characters. However, there was no consistent evidence of the second finding. Rather, the overall image of teachers from the current study was of a relatively bland, caring person, who made sure that the environment was set up and ready for children, greeted children and parents, provided directions, encouraged children to play without necessarily engaging in play themselves, and who generally ensured that children were happy and comfortable. In short, many teachers seemed to be ‘nice ladies who loved children’ (Stonehouse, 1994). Gemma (2001, p. 75) came to a similar conclusion, that teachers were depicted as ‘nice and smart [but] boring’. The main exceptions to this model were encountered as children wondered what their teacher would be like and imagined a monster or mean teacher, only to be reassured by the end of the book that the teacher really was not scary.

It is possible to argue that children’s knowledge of school derives from many sources and that picture storybooks are but one of those many sources. However, given that many of these books about starting school are featured in transition programs and used with the purpose of familiarising children with school, it is important to consider the nature of the images and the interactions that occur around these. Sandefur and Moore (2004, p. 42) note that these books have ‘power not just in teaching children and their parents about the culture of schooling, but in shaping it as well’. For many children, the monocultural characters in books and the stereotypical representation of teachers and teachers’ work may make identification with either characters or place problematic.

One possible reaction to these images of teachers and teaching is to discount them as irrelevant. However, Gamman and Marshment (1989, p. 2) caution against ‘dismiss[ing] the popular by always positioning ourselves outside it’. Further, Mitchell and Weber (1995, p. 324) suggest that examinations of ‘contemporary images of teaching in children’s popular culture serve as entry points for interrogating the meaning of power and pedagogy in teaching and learning’. This argument supports examination of, and reflection on, the often contradictory images of teachers in popular culture, and links this to exploration of the ways in which understandings related to teachers and teaching are socially constructed. In this vein, it is not merely important to consider the implications for children about
to start school and the ways in which these images influence children's expectations of school. It is also important to consider teachers' own understandings of how the broader culture interprets and perceives their work.

Many educators, parents and children themselves draw on picture storybooks as a means of promoting familiarity with school, what happens at school and the people who will be encountered at school. The images within such books help shape the experiences and expectations of transition to school. Greater interrogation of the nature of these representations, and the ways in which they contribute to expectations about school, are important elements in understanding what is important for different groups involved in the transition to school.

References


Picture books

Announcing the EYLF Professional Learning Program
The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program (EYLF PLP) provides ongoing professional support to services as they engage in the EYLF implementation process. The program is a national initiative and will take place in 2010–11.

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Early childhood teachers’ understandings of and provision for quality

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IT IS WELL ESTABLISHED THAT high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) enhance children’s wellbeing and development and have social and economic benefits. Yet quality is a contested term that is understood differently and used in diverse ways for a range of purposes. This paper reports on a study that investigated a) how six early childhood teachers working in long day care services understood and made provision for quality, and b) their perspectives on how quality was understood and provided for in their services. An in-depth interview was conducted with each teacher. Data analysis was informed by Cleveland and Krashinksky’s (2005) tangible and less tangible aspects of quality and Goodfellow’s (2003) hidden dimensions of professional practice. The paper highlights the potential use of metaphor to illuminate less tangible aspects of quality, particularly those associated with professional practice and policy making.

Introduction

Although early childhood teachers play a central role in the enactment of quality, there has been surprisingly little investigation of their perspectives on quality. A review of over 200 peer-reviewed articles about quality (Fenech, Harrison, Sumsion, Press & Bowes, 2008) found only one that included the perspective of an early childhood teacher. While the review may not have been exhaustive, the lack of attention to early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality is concerning, given that teacher practices are a key determinant of quality (Layzer & Goodson, 2006). As Textor (1998, p. 167) points out, ‘What goes on is determined by the teachers to a very large extent’. This paper contributes to efforts to address the almost complete absence of teachers’ perspectives on quality by reporting on an exploratory study that investigated a) how six early childhood teachers in long day care services in regional Australia understood and made provision for quality, and b) their perspectives on how quality was understood and provided for in their services.

The paper begins by distinguishing between modern, post-modernist and what we term ‘reflexive’ perspectives on quality. It then reports on the exploratory study referred to above. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study, including the potential of metaphor to illuminate less tangible aspects of quality and hidden dimensions of professional practice.

Perspectives on quality

In using the terms modern, post-modernist and reflexive, we do not mean to imply that perspectives on quality are necessarily sharply delineated or even mutually exclusive. Our intent is to offer a broadbrush conceptual tool to inform discussions about possibilities for evaluating quality. In this section, we briefly describe these perspectives and provide examples of studies that, in our view, reflect them. We discuss their strengths and limitations and identify perspectives evident in the Australian policy context.

Modernist perspectives

Modernist perspectives on quality are informed by the application of prescribed norms, derived from the domains of developmental psychology and science. From these perspectives, quality is considered primarily a readily measurable construct involving a set of observable and quantifiable characteristics (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney & Abbott-Shim, 2000). Thus, quality can be evaluated using a set of ‘objective’
Post-modernist perspectives

In contrast, those who adhere to post-modernist perspectives see quality as ‘a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interest, rather than an objective and universal reality’ (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 5). They argue that modernist discourses of quality are only one of many possible languages of evaluation (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). They see the term ‘quality’ as a value-laden term aligned to discourses of modernity and argue that the use of that term represents a decision to take up those discourses (P. Moss, personal communication, 19 August 2008). Post-modernist perspectives recognise that discourses shape ways of thinking about quality. These discourses shape teachers’ practices aimed at achieving and evaluating quality in particular ways (Clark, Trine Kjorholt & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Post-modernist perspectives on quality are evident in the Stockholm project in Sweden and schools in Reggio Emilia, in Italy (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Pedagogical practice in these settings is grounded in the culture, traditions and context of the communities in which they are embedded. Program decisions are based on discussions among children, families and teachers. Judgements of value are made collectively by all participants rather than from pre-determined rating scales that characterise modernist perspectives. A strength of post-modernist perspectives, therefore, is that they encourage contextually relevant judgements and promote early childhood settings as sites of democratic practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Critics might argue that post-modernist approaches assume high levels of professional knowledge, and without a core set of conditions for evaluating practice, professionals may lack sufficient direction and guidance. Soler and Miller (2003) also refer to criticisms about lack of adequate accountability.

Reflexive perspectives

Like post-modernist perspectives, reflexive perspectives acknowledge quality as ‘a value-laden, subjective and dynamic concept which varies with time, perspective and place’ (Pascal & Bertram, 2000, p. 7). In contrast to post-modernist perspectives, however, reflexive perspectives use a combination of approaches for evaluating quality. Some stem from top–down approaches and include a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures. Others develop from bottom–up approaches, where teams of early childhood professionals work together to develop shared understandings of, and procedures for evaluating, quality (Pascal, 1993). Several major studies from the United Kingdom (UK) have taken a reflexive and dynamic approach to evaluating quality, using combinations of quantifiable and qualitative measures. These include the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2003), Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002) and the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002). These studies have been valuable in highlighting the connection between high-quality early childhood services and gains in children’s development. An advantage of reflexive approaches is that they enable evaluations of quality to be tailored to individual services and contexts. On the other hand, when they are derived from diverse and non-standardised measures, they do not easily allow for larger scale comparisons of quality.

Perspectives of quality evident in the Australian policy context

In Australia, the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) is responsible for quality assurance in long day care services, family day care and outside of school hours care through the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). While not necessarily the original intent of QIAS (Wangmann, 1995), the current system appears to adopt primarily modernist perspectives. The seven quality areas and 33 principles focus predominantly on aspects of
quality that are relatively easily identified and measured and lend themselves to be interpreted in modernist ways. While these quality areas and principles make an important contribution to understandings of quality, they potentially provide a superficial view of professional practice by narrowing the ‘parameters of quality’ to readily observable and quantifiable aspects (Fenech, 2007, p. 12). A recent report from an expert advisory panel (EAP) to the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2009) acknowledges concern about the current regulatory environment and the ‘sidelining’ of professional judgements and risk management in an effort to deliver high-quality programs. The report emphasises the need to move beyond structural aspects, which consider program attributes and process aspects, that focus on ‘environmental supports and/or interactions like the extent and quality of caregiver–child interaction’ in conceptualising quality (Martinez-Beck, 2009, p. 2). The EAP argued for a range of ‘aspects of quality’ and ‘quality enablers’ including orientation quality, educational concept and practice, operational quality, child-outcome quality or performance standards and standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 18–20).

Conceptual framing

The report of the EAP is in keeping with the work of Cleveland and Krashinsky (2005) who consider tangible and less tangible aspects of quality. Their construct of these, complemented by Goodfellow’s (2003) construct of hidden dimensions of professional practice, provided the conceptual frame for the current study. Tangible aspects of quality are similar to structural aspects of quality and include readily measurable aspects, such as child–staff ratios, group sizes, qualifications of staff, learning materials and physical capital. Less tangible aspects of quality include enthusiasm, leadership, motivation, child–staff interactions, beliefs and the complexity of decision making that contributes to professional judgements (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2005). Goodfellow (2003) refers to these aspects as hidden dimensions of practice. Less tangible aspects of quality and hidden dimensions of practice encompass a broader range than process aspects and are difficult to measure by traditional systems and rating scales.

Methodology

The exploratory study reported here investigated a) how six early childhood teachers in long day care services understood and made provision for quality, and b) their perspectives on how quality was understood and provided for in their services. Participants held a degree in early childhood education and worked in long day care services in a regional Australian city or its surrounds. They were recruited through an invitational email to nine prospective participants known to one of us through our professional networks and selected because of their experience, qualifications and employment in a long day care service. Six of the nine teachers contacted agreed to participate. Three participants were employed in the non-profit sector and three in the for-profit sector.

Data was generated through an individual, in-depth semi-structured interview with each participant. Interviews were conducted in a venue chosen by the participant and ranged in duration from 30 minutes to one hour. Interviews were audiotaped and, as a precautionary measure, notes were taken of the key points discussed.

Participants were asked about how they understood and made provision for quality and how quality was understood and provided for in their service (see Appendix for interview schedule). Transcripts were analysed inductively using techniques of constant comparison and inferential codes to establish emerging patterns and themes in the data (Garrick, 1999). Patterns were referred to as themes if they were evident in the responses of at least half the participants. The themes were then analysed deductively using the constructs of tangible and less tangible aspects of quality (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2005) and hidden dimensions of professional practice (Goodfellow, 2003).

Findings

Eight themes were identified overall (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Examples from interview transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Quality for the children, quality for the staff, quality for the parents … the relationships between all of those people. Quality is about the relationships the staff have with the parents and the children—how comfortable everyone is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified staff</td>
<td>The qualifications of the staff … gives people a better understanding on where they are coming from and why they are doing things the way they are doing it It’s the hiring of qualified staff that’s really important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>The type of educational program that you have … epitomises quality The way you set up play spaces … the programming side of things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Themes | Examples from interview transcripts
---|---
Environment | Things like a safe, secure environment. The environment is safe and beautiful and it’s stimulating.
Professional judgements | That you are making the right decisions at the time.
Teamwork | [We] work really hard on team building so there is a good relationship with the staff. Staff working together as a team.
Standards | Quality in long day care makes me automatically think of accreditation [and regulations]. To make sure we are meeting all of those guidelines [accreditation] and are on the right track.

**Challenges of articulating understandings of quality**

Participants’ responses to the question, ‘What does “quality” mean to you?’ highlighted the inherent difficulties in articulating understandings of such complex phenomena as quality. There seemed to be two main reasons for the difficulties experienced by participants. First, as Sally, a teacher with two years of experience, employed in a corporately owned long day care centre noted, quality is ‘very personal and also contextual. Quality for one person is very different for another’. She later noted, ‘It’s such a hard word to define and a topic that is really fluid in meaning’. Sally made an implicit link between concepts of quality and teachers’ beliefs: ‘I think it is really important to believe in what you are doing and understand why you are choosing to do something in a particular way’. It seems likely that teachers’ beliefs about what constitutes high-quality practices influence their understandings of quality, the emphases they place on different aspects of quality, and the decisions they make (Brownlee, Berthelsen & Segaran, 2009). The challenges associated with articulating beliefs, therefore, could account for difficulties in articulating understandings of quality.

Second, the multiple and interconnecting contributors to quality appeared to add to the participants’ difficulty in articulating their understandings of quality. The complexities of these connections mean that quality can be thought of as ‘rhizomatic’. A rhizome or rhizomatic structure is a complex web of links and connections (Deleuze, Guattari & Massumi, 2004). As Deleuze et al. (2004, p. 7) explain, rhizomes assume ‘very diverse forms’ and extend ‘in all directions’. Caroline, an experienced teacher working in a not-for-profit long day care centre, seemed to be alluding to the ‘rhizomatic’ nature of quality when she commented, ‘Everything you do needs to have that quality flowing through it’.

Rhizomatic ways of thinking about quality do not fit comfortably with linear approaches evident in the primarily modernist perspectives underpinning Australia’s current quality-assurance mechanisms (Hutchins, Frances & Saggers, 2009). They highlight the need for new languages for articulating quality and discovering multiple connections (Sellers, 2005). Given the lack of alternative languages in the existing regulatory environment, it is not surprising that the participants in this study struggled to articulate their understandings of quality.

**Tangible and less tangible aspects of quality**

When asked about what they understood by quality, participants also identified a mix of tangible and less tangible aspects. Seven themes (that is, patterns in the data evident in the responses of at least half the participants) were identified. As identified in Figure 1, in order of salience, these were: relationships, qualified staff, programming, the environment, professional judgements, teamwork and standards. Three of these themes—relationships, professional judgements, and teamwork—were coded as reflecting, for the most part, less tangible aspects of quality. The four remaining themes—programming, qualified staff, the environment and standards—were coded as reflecting, for the most part, tangible aspects. Participants considered both tangible and less tangible aspects to be important.

**Figure 1. Comparison of what teachers understood by quality and how they considered quality was understood within their service**

Participants gave most emphasis to relationships between children, staff, families and the community. As Jane, a teacher with more than 20 years of experience and currently employed in a not-for-profit long day care centre, noted, ‘The relationships are so important. You can do without some of your equipment and some of your facilities if you have good relationships going;
they’re really important’. Participants also discussed the centrality of discerning professional judgements and daily decision making to quality. As Sally explained, ‘I think it is about [en]trusting that you are making the right decisions at the time’. Their views were consistent with Goodfellow’s (2003) emphasis on relationships and complex professional discernment as hidden dimensions of professional practice. Goodfellow (2003) refers to early childhood teachers ‘thinking and acting in complex, contextual and emotional ways’ as they participate in these relationships or ‘human encounters’ (McLean, 1999, p. 67, as cited in Goodfellow, 2003, p. 51).

Participants also referred frequently to teamwork which they saw as closely connected to themes of relationships and professional judgements. Caroline noted, ‘Our service works really hard on team building so there’s a good relationship within the staff which I think flows on to quality care’. These were coded as less tangible aspects of quality.

As with other less tangible aspects of quality, the complex connections of teamwork, professional judgements and relationships are not easily measured and identified. In comparison, programming, qualified staff, the environment and standards appeared more tangible in the sense of being identifiable and measurable, at least on initial coding. Yet, even here, many aspects were not measurable. For example, Karen, an experienced teacher in a privately owned long day care service, discussed the connections between her professional judgements, programming and the environment. She stated:

All of that [professional judgement] helps the quality of your program … that helps you decide where you and the children are going to next and the way you document and work together. The environment is the other thing that makes up quality … and that plays a really big part in your program.

Here the less tangible aspect (professional judgement) directly influenced the tangible aspects (programming) and (environment).

Participants considered that qualified staff were key to quality. Jane commented on the differences that, in her view, qualified staff bring to programs:

I think again it comes down to the quality of the staff; that’s really important and that is a lot to do with the training … they ask more in-depth questions about a particular child and their needs and they make reflections and come up with suggestions.

Although the employment of qualified staff can be considered a tangible aspect of quality, the hidden dimensions of their practice are not easily identified and so, to some extent, remain less tangible. This paradox supports Layzer and Goodson’s (2006) argument that measures of quality and influences on quality are often confused and not easily understood.

Disjunctures between understandings of quality

When participants were asked to describe what quality meant within their services, rather than what they, themselves, understood by quality, similar, but not identical, themes emerged (Figure 1). Six themes of relationships, qualified staff, teamwork, programming, standards and attending professional development were identified. There was, however, a difference in emphasis.

The theme of standards was particularly prominent. Indeed, each participant referred to standards. For example, Sally noted, ‘It means that we are doing the job we are supposed to be doing. That we are meeting the expectations of regulations, accreditation and of our families’. Sally considered that, within her service, quality was understood to mean abiding by a set of rules or standards that govern her practice. Yet, when Sally expressed her own understandings of quality, she highlighted her professional judgement, trust and meaningful interactions with children. Participants noted that accountability documents and systems within their services constrained their ability to enact professional judgements; time they could have otherwise spent engaging with the children. Sally noted the tension between being accountable for quality and enacting quality when she stated:

Well, I need to make sure that I’m doing all this [completing service documentation to account for quality] and I need to tick all the boxes and I think … that might have been a quality interaction [with a child] if I didn’t have to step back and document that it actually occurred.

Another participant, Julie, an experienced teacher employed by a large corporation, discussed differences between her understandings of quality and her perspectives of how her service understood quality:

[Company name] has a lot of forms and formats that we have to use; to them that’s providing a high-quality service by making sure all areas are covered … whereas to me, the ‘hands-on’ is the quality, whether it is cooking with the children, doing group time or sitting down talking to them … the paperwork takes second place to that.

For some participants, the emphasis in their services was on accounting for their provision of quality rather than enacting it. In their view, onerous responsibilities for the purpose of accountability for quality reduced their availability and energy needed for engaging in meaningful experiences with children, other staff and families. These findings were consistent with a larger recent Australian study (Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2006) that highlighted early childhood teachers can feel subjected to a deficit model of accountability framed around risk-management discourses rather than a model grounded in respect for professional judgement. Notably, professional
judgements and the environment were not mentioned by participants in the current study when they discussed how quality was considered within their service. It may be that an over-reliance on measures emanating from modernist perspectives creates ‘blind spots’ in which other aspects of quality emphasised within post-modernist or reflexive perspectives may be overlooked.

Figure 1 compares the most salient themes in participants’ responses when asked a) what they understood by quality, and b) what was considered important within their services. The teachers emphasised less tangible aspects of quality and the hidden dimensions of professional practice. Within their services, however, they perceived that there was more emphasis on tangible aspects of quality. In particular, the teachers placed most emphasis on relationships (less tangible), while in their view the greatest emphasis in their services was on standards (tangible). Figure 1 highlights the disjunctures between these early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality and their perspectives of how quality was understood within their services. Again, however, we emphasise caution in interpreting these findings given the small numbers in this study.

Discussion, implications and contributions of the study: The possibilities of metaphor

Although it is not possible to generalise the findings of a small qualitative study such as the one reported here to a broader population, the findings appear to raise issues for discussions about Australia’s foreshadowed new National Quality Framework (DEEWR, 2009). In particular, they suggest that there is a need to consider new ways to articulate understandings about quality as a complex and interconnected phenomenon. They also indicate a need to highlight and explore less tangible aspects of quality. Moreover, they call for focused discussions among stakeholders who have an interest in, but not necessarily shared perspectives of, quality. In the remainder of this paper we argue that the use of metaphors offers possibilities for addressing these implications. We illustrate our case using two metaphors—quality as water and quality as a map—to highlight complex and interconnected understandings of quality while acknowledging that other metaphors, such as ‘quality as a rhizome’, may be equally generative.

Metaphor as a means of conceptualising complex ideas

Metaphor, as a means of ‘seeing something in terms of something else’ (Burke, 1945, as cited in Cameron & Low, 1999, p. 3), can assist in conceptualising and clarifying complex ideas. Metaphor, along with the use of poetry and visual images, has been used previously in early childhood research substantively or tangentially related to quality, usually as a medium for generating rich data from which new insights might be drawn (for example, Jorde Bloom, 2000). Our interest in metaphor in this article is somewhat different and, following Cameron and Low (1999), focuses on the possibility that deliberate changes in the metaphors used might bring about changes in ways of thinking; in this case, about quality in ECEC and professional practices and policies aimed at ensuring quality. We are particularly interested in the potential of metaphor to make visible less tangible and hidden dimensions of quality.

Metaphors of quality as ‘water’ and ‘maps’

In reflecting on the themes identified in Figure 1, and on the disjunctions between the participants’ emphasis on less tangible aspects of quality and what they perceived to be an emphasis on tangible aspects of quality in their services, we explored, in a preliminary and tentative way, the potential of metaphors of ‘water’ and ‘maps’ to help us think more deeply about quality.

The metaphor of ‘water’ represents the fluid and less tangible aspects of quality and hidden dimensions of practice, such as relationships, teamwork and professional judgements. More generally, it reflects participant comments about the ‘fluid’ and less visible nature of quality; for example, Sally noted that ‘quality is not necessarily so visible’, while Caroline commented that ‘it sort of flows’. Miller eloquently encapsulates the fluid nature of water when she describes how ‘... it takes the shape of the container that holds it, be it a walker’s cupped hands or the hollow in the hills’ (Miller as cited in Dombrovskis & Miller, 1978, p. 62). An analogy can be drawn between the interconnected (less visible) and fluid aspects of quality shaped by the contexts where they are enacted and the images in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Quality as water—fluid and contextual

In contrast, the metaphor of quality as a map, as illustrated in Figure 3, highlights the tangible aspects of quality, such as standards, management, programming
and physical resources. This metaphor is implicit in the comments of participants, like Jane, who when talking about current accreditation documents, noted 'it’s all written out so well … they [staff] can recognise the standards we should be keeping'. While Jane’s comment points to the benefits of a map for prescribing quality practices, Caroline alluded to the limitations of maps. In stating that ‘as far as accreditation [is concerned] I guess they are addressing quality but I think they are only addressing aspects of what quality could be’, Caroline seemed to be agreeing with critical commentators (e.g. Fenech, 2007) that maps to quality may have a ‘narrowing’ effect on professional practice.

Figure 3. Quality as a map

| Travelpod.com, 2008 |

Tensions between metaphors and perspectives of quality

The findings of this exploratory study highlight possible tensions, conflicts and professional dilemmas for the participants in balancing their understandings of quality and their views about the aspects of quality emphasised in their services. Similarly, we contend that there can be tensions, conflicts and dilemmas for ECEC policy-makers and professionals, more broadly in balancing different perspectives or metaphors of quality. We are concerned that under the current QIAS, a modernist focus on measurable, tangible aspects of quality has become overly dominant. Metaphorically, as Bateson (1988, as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 37) cautions, ‘We live with the illusion that the map is the territory, or the landscape, and the name is the same as the named’. Dahlberg et al. (2007, p. 36) draw our attention to the ‘dangers of this kind of mapping’ as also noted in Lewis Carroll’s story of Sylvie and Bruno concluded:

Mein Herr looked so thoroughly bewildered that I thought it best to change subject. ‘What a useful thing a pocket map is!’ I remarked.

‘That’s another thing we’ve learned from your Nation,’ said Mein Herr, ‘map-making. But we’ve

carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?’

‘About six inches to the mile.’

‘Only six inches!’ exclaimed Mein Herr. ‘We very soon got to six yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!’

‘Have you used it much?’ I enquired.

‘It has never been spread out yet,’ said Mein Herr. ‘The farmers objected: They said it would cover the whole country, and shut out sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well’. (Carroll, 1996, pp. 556–557)

Lewis Carroll’s story could be read as caution against seeing tangible aspects of quality that can be identified on a QIAS ‘map’ as synonymous with quality. If the map alone is perceived as quality, there may be a tendency to overlook other, more fluid and contextually relevant possibilities for making provision for quality, emphasised in post-modernist and reflexive perspectives of quality and the metaphor of ‘quality as water’. Equally, we acknowledge the dangers of overemphasising the less tangible aspects of quality and its fluidity and situatedness. Nor do we want to create unhelpful binaries between different perspectives and metaphors of quality.

Metaphors as a means of bringing about change

While mindful of these dangers, we return to Cameron and Low’s (1999) contention that metaphors have potential to bring about change. We see metaphor as a potentially productive means of expanding ways of thinking about quality and professional practices and policies aimed at ensuring quality. In the remainder of this article, we identify changes we would like to see in light of our reflections on quality.

Increased use of metaphor as a tool

Metaphor can serve as a tool to articulate new understandings. In this study we used metaphor as a tool to reflect on what quality meant for the early childhood teacher participants and their perspectives of what quality meant within their services. Low (1999) rightly warns that researchers can make unwarranted assumptions about metaphors and be inclined to see what they anticipate or want to see. Nevertheless, we believe that our use of metaphor led to deeper insights into the interview data and into our own thinking of quality than would have otherwise been the case. It enabled us to recognise, for example, that some properties of water—its fluidity, the way it changes shape according to its container, its reflectiveness, and its capacities to sustain
and transform—can equally apply to quality. Mindful of Low’s warning, we then discussed our interpretations with a ‘critical friend’ who has internationally recognised expertise in narrative and metaphorical ways of thinking. We think it likely that metaphor may be an equally useful tool for early childhood professionals.

Future research could usefully explore whether metaphor can assist early childhood professionals to articulate their understandings of quality. It could also investigate whether metaphor might be an effective tool for clarifying and negotiating both subtle and substantial differences in perspectives and understandings of quality. The potential of metaphor in policy development, professional learning and pre-service teacher education, as a means of extending and complexifying conversations about quality and conceptualising new possibilities for enacting and ‘measuring’ quality, could be a further focus for exploration.

More attention to the less tangible and interconnected aspects of quality

Goodfellow (2003, p. 48) noted that hidden dimensions of professional practice are ‘largely ignored’ in quality assurance systems such as QIAS. The same could be argued about the less tangible aspects of quality. For example, ‘staff qualifications’ are currently viewed by quality assurance systems as a structural and tangible aspect of quality. Yet the contributions and influence of qualified staff, through the complex daily decisions they make based on their professional judgements, in effect constitute less tangible aspects of quality.

Because they are less easily identified, less tangible aspects are generally not made explicit, even though they are vital to quality. Measures that only consider tangible aspects of quality, therefore, could have a deleterious effect on the provision of quality by further reinforcing attention primarily on tangible aspects. In the current study, participating teachers hinted at a professional dilemma—should they focus more on the less tangible aspects of quality, which they considered important even though they are not accounted for in the QIAS, or on the tangible aspects of quality that, in their view, were considered more important within their services because they are emphasised in the QIAS? The use of metaphor could help to redress the current imbalance in the focus of quality assurance systems by assisting in articulating and making more explicit the less tangible and hidden dimensions of quality.

Similarly, the interrelated, rhizomatic nature of quality makes it difficult for traditional measures of quality emanating from modernist perspectives to account for the complex array of connections and influences between aspects of quality. Greater attention to these interconnected aspects and how they play out is warranted. Again, we believe metaphor has a useful role.

Conclusion

An impetus for the current study was concern regarding the apparent dearth of research about early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality (Fenech et al., 2008), even though teachers are a key determinant of quality. Although small and exploratory, the study has demonstrated that examining early childhood teachers’ understandings of quality illuminates different perspectives about quality and the complexity of providing for quality. Given that, at the time of writing, Australia’s foreshadowed National Quality Framework is currently under development, it is important and timely to pay greater attention to early childhood professionals’ understandings of quality. As we have also argued, metaphor appears to have considerable potential as a tool for exploring and making more explicit the less tangible and interconnected aspects of quality that can often be overlooked in quality assurance systems based primarily on modernist perspectives of quality. Accordingly, we advocate further exploration of the usefulness of metaphor for early childhood professionals, students enrolled in pre-service preparation programs, policy-makers and researchers with an interest in quality.

Appendix

Interview questions

1. [Name of participant] … I’m wondering if you could tell me what quality [in early childhood services] means to you?

   [Prompt: It might help to think about what you consider high quality in services you’ve seen.]

2. What does quality mean in your service?

3. In what ways are you able to implement and address quality in your service?

4. How does your service set about providing quality care?

   [Prompt: It might help to consider ways your service supports quality or any barriers to providing quality.]

5. What aspects of the way your service operates are the most and least helpful in assisting you to provide quality care?

References


Introduction

As the Australian Government recently released the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) it is timely to reflect on how early childhood teachers may respond to this document. There are multiple and interrelated factors that influence a teacher’s engagement with a curriculum initiative. These factors can be directly related to the implementation of an initiative, such as the availability of professional development sessions that accompany an initiative, or factors related to the context of the early childhood setting, such as time allocated for professional learning. These systemic factors also interrelate with personal factors, such as the priority an educator gives a curriculum initiative. Each factor has the potential to influence decisions made by teachers to engage with a curriculum initiative and the processes of change.

Over the last decade, some state governments developed curriculum documents informed by research and global trends, to guide early childhood teachers to adopt contemporary pedagogies (Burgess & Fleet, 2009). Early childhood teachers in the state of New South Wales (NSW) experienced an intense period of change in 2001–2002 when the NSW Government disseminated three non-mandated curriculum initiatives to all licensed children’s services. The Department of Community Services (DoCS), the regulating body for all early childhood services for children under five years of age, expanded its position from regulator of minimum structural standards (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007) to one of curriculum design. For this paper, curriculum ‘refers to all the provisions professionals make for the whole of the child’s experience in the service’ (Stonehouse, 2001, p. 19). As there are few studies of teacher decision making in early childhood education (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008), the aim of this study was to illuminate how early childhood teachers understand and implement curriculum initiatives.

Each of the curriculum initiatives of this study varied in topic, philosophy and implementation strategies. First, a literacy initiative (Arthur et al., 2001) suggested multiple practical ideas for literacies provisions and experiences. Second, a pedagogy initiative (Stonehouse, 2001) included a set of reflective questions to support individualised interpretations of current educational practices. Third, a health initiative (Hayden, De Gioia, Fraser & Hadley, 2002) outlined three highly structured health-promotion strategies.

There are multiple decision-making points for early childhood teachers at different stages of change. The first stage, initiation, is defined by Fullan (2001, p. 53) as ‘the process leading up to and including the decision
to proceed with implementation’. It is an information-seeking stage that is balanced with a personal needs assessment (Rogers, 2003). The following stage, persuasion (Rogers, 2003, p. 169), occurs when a teacher forms a positive or negative attitude towards an initiative. During this stage, the teacher considers the particular characteristics of the initiative, such as the ‘relative advantage, compatibility, complexity’ (Rogers, 2003, p. 15) or its feasibility (Evans, 1996). This process is one of mental rehearsal as teachers are highly attuned to the pragmatic requirements of change (Little, 2001).

Finally, implementation begins when an individual decides to put an initiative into use through the practical process of trialling aspects of the initiative in the classroom. It is at this stage that the ‘trialability’ and ‘observability’ (Rogers, 2003, p. 16) characteristics of an initiative become critical to a teacher’s continuing positive attitude and adoption. If a teacher is able to select and trial aspects of an initiative and that trial produces beneficial results for the learners or the teacher, then a positive attitude and further implementation is likely to occur (Walsh & Gardner, 2006). This process involves first a change in behaviour and, where the teacher observes improvements in learning, a possible transformation of the teacher’s beliefs, attitudes or knowledge (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Rogers, 2003). Teachers who continue to implement an initiative beyond this trial stage and adopt aspects of an initiative are classified broadly as users (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Effective professional learning experiences support curriculum initiative adoption and transformation of teachers’ attitudes and beliefs (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001). Traditional external professional development sessions such as train-the-trainer (Naylor & Bull, 2000) may provoke change as they assist teachers in understanding the content of a curriculum initiative and may influence the decision to initiate engagement with the innovation (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Murphy, 2004). Training events, however, situate teachers as passive stakeholders where knowledge is ‘delivered’ by ‘experts’ (Kennedy, 2005, p. 237).

Although there are few studies of change in early childhood services, school-based research studies indicate that low-cost short-term group training can be the least effective professional learning strategy, as fewer than 10% of teachers implement changes following a training event (Lowden, 2005; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Walsh & Gardner, 2006). Teachers from the same organisation attending as a group improves results but only where other high-quality factors are present, such as training sessions of more than two to four days (Garet et al., 2001). Furthermore, Thornburn (2006, p. 364) argues that training ‘certainly does not appear to work when there is a need for a deeper pedagogical or professional transformation’.

Collaborative teacher-led learning within a centre has become a key indicator of effective educational environments that support the engagement of teachers in meaningful change (Bartunek, 2003; Easton, 2008). Frequent and challenging discussions on teaching is a key characteristic across all effective forms of collaborative learning environments (Borko, 2004; Garet et al., 2001; Rusch, 2005; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). One well-researched and defined form of collaborative practice is a professional learning community (PLC) (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, 1997). Although it is argued that a PLC is an effective strategy for change, Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) identify multiple management strategies and contextual factors required to develop or sustain a PLC. This suggests a high investment of time, effort and focus may be required to sustain the development of the learning community as well as actually implementing the curriculum initiative.

Within collaborative learning environments, localised external facilitators, including distinguished practitioners, may play a central role in provoking engagement with an initiative through a balanced outside-in inside-out relationship that moves teachers to a high level of reflection on practice (Easton, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2007). The facilitator needs to receive substantial training and resources and to be highly skilled to provoke and promote change (Borko, 2004; Hayden, Frederick, Smith & Broudy, 2001). In countries such as the United States of America and Canada, it is a specialist role. However, Australia seems not to adopt the facilitator role at the expected standard—which is a full-time facilitator based at each school—even where it adopts and modifies global curriculum initiatives (Center, Freeman & Robertson, 2001).

Contemporary principles of effective professional learning highlight the importance of:

- an embedded approach
- high contact hours over long periods of time
- interactive engagement, including coaching and reflection experiences that combine content knowledge, meaningful practice of pedagogy and a deep understanding of learning and assessment
- supportive contextual structures such as time, resources, leadership of a whole school approach and shared goals
- results-based evaluation
- teacher motivation that guides future direction (Borko, 2004; Easton, 2008; Garet et al., 2001; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi & Gallagher, 2007).

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The essence of teacher engagement is an overall positive response where teachers become the life force for the curriculum initiative. The rejection of an initiative, on the other hand, limits the initiative's potential to effect change. There are, however, multiple factors that may influence a teacher at each decision-making point. In this paper, these factors will be examined through teachers’ decision making at the initiation and implementation stages of their personal process of change.

Method

This paper reports on the questionnaire stage of a mixed-method case study. The first stage—a content analysis of the three curriculum documents for their aims, content and change processes—is briefly reported here as contextual information. Morse (2003) argues that the combination of methods within the one study can broaden the scope of the project, resulting in a greater understanding of a complex phenomenon. The theoretical perspective underpinning the study aligns with a constructivist, interpretive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2003). The questionnaire sought teachers’ responses at a number of decision-making points for each of the curriculum initiatives, including attendance at training, attitude at initiation, comparison to current practice, successful and unsuccessful adoption and in-house re-use.

Respondents to the questionnaire were 25 university-trained early childhood teachers from community-based preschools in Sydney. The responses to the closed questions were coded and descriptive statistics calculated. The approach to the open question responses followed the ‘open coding process’ as it was open and tolerant, where the categories were allowed to emerge from the data, reflecting elements of a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To refine the categories, Yin’s (2003) ‘pattern-matching logic’ was adopted. This enabled the teachers’ experiences of each innovation and of multiple innovations to be revealed.

Results

Across the three initiatives there were many common implementation factors that may have influenced a teacher’s decision to engage with each initiative. Voluntary external training was offered to all staff for the literacy initiative, while one staff member was invited to attend training for the pedagogy initiative and no training was offered with the health initiative. The training sessions utilised the ‘train-the-trainer’ model.

The module design of each initiative supported ongoing internal learning experiences based on the development of a PLC (Hall & Hord, 2001). Each initiative also suggested a voluntary internal peer facilitator, with the pedagogy initiative offering some further training to ‘area facilitators’.

The suggested time commitment for in-house training varied from 12 to 64 hours with a projected implementation period of two to six months. Each of these factors is examined in the following questionnaire findings.

Attitudes at initiation

The teachers were asked to recall their initial response to the arrival of each curriculum initiative. The responses to this open question were content analysed in phrase sections, coded and categorised. The response type suggested a categorisation by the teacher’s attitude—either positive or negative—that also revealed factors that might have influenced a teacher’s decision to engage with the curriculum initiative. The responses for all initiatives were combined for an analysis of the issues underlying these attitudes.

Of the pooled attitudes responses, 61% were positive responses to the arrival of the initiatives at the preschools. Embedded in the positive attitude statements were clarifying phrases that revealed the initiatives met the individual teacher’s interest and were acknowledged as a resource. The curriculum initiatives also provided validation for some teachers who had already adopted what they perceived to be current, at that time, aspects of early childhood education pedagogy.

Negative initial attitudes to the arrival of curriculum initiatives were expressed by 39% of the responses. The negative responses revealed factors that may influence a teacher’s decision to engage with an initiative. The most frequent response identified workload or work priority concerns which seemed to highlight the cumulative impact of multiple curriculum initiatives—six teachers bemoaned the arrival of ‘another’ package. After workload concerns, the content of the curriculum initiatives provoked the second most frequent negative response. Teachers found the documents ‘daunting’, or they felt ‘confused’ or ‘disappointed’. Time was also an issue for these teachers and is a consistent concern across all educational settings where teachers attempt to find time to undertake professional development (Barkley, 1999; Little, 2001; Stoll et al., 2006) or to engage with the initiative in the initiation stage (Penuel et al., 2007). Overall, the negative responses were spread across each curriculum initiative which may have indicated that teachers were working at what they perceived as full capacity with the number of work demands filling their time to saturation.

The responses of the small group of teachers who combined a positive response with a countering
negative clarifying phrase seemed to speak from a central position with a voice that resonated across all the responses. One of these teachers expressed: ‘Pleased to be provided with it, eager to get to study it, but no time to do so’. The arrival of a curriculum initiative may induce a positive response, possibly reflective of the teachers’ appreciation of the perceived support and outsider interest in their role; however, there is the reality of engaging with the curriculum initiative. Teachers seemed to be saying, ‘Thank you, but …’

**Declining positive attitudes, increasing negative attitudes**

The results for each curriculum initiative (see Figure 1) indicated that only 44% of teachers held a positive attitude to the arrival of the first initiative and the rate of positive attitudes declined with each subsequent curriculum initiative. There was a substantial decline in positive attitudes between the first and last curriculum initiative; a period of 19 months. Conversely, 28% of teachers held a negative attitude to the arrival of the first curriculum initiative with an increasing rate of negative attitudes with each subsequent curriculum initiative.

![Figure 1. Attitudes of teachers to the curriculum initiatives (n = 25)](image)

There was no a priori reason to suspect this pattern, however it does suggest that a decreasing number of teachers engaged with successive initiatives. Lamie (2004) has argued other factors have a greater impact than attitude on curriculum implementation. Thus, there are three possible explanations for this trend of decreasing engagement.

First, process factors related to training and/or provision of facilitators were not adequate for the successful engagement of teachers with the curriculum initiative. Each curriculum initiative offered a different level of training and facilitation to support the implementation process.

Second, content factors did not motivate the teacher’s engagement with the initiative. Rogers (2003) states that for the successful and fast uptake of an initiative, it must meet the interest or need of the recipient. As each curriculum initiative differed in content, this may explain a varied pattern to teachers’ responses to implementation. The content was also divided into self-learning modules designed to initiate ongoing learning within a PLC.

Third, contextual factors such as intensification of teachers’ work (Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Sumption, 2004) and/or timing of the initiatives’ arrival negatively impacted on the engagement of teachers. Fullan (1999, p. 27) warns that timing is important where multiple initiatives are being introduced because for teachers ‘it is easy to experience overload, fragmentation and incoherence … [when] initiatives are introduced before previous ones are adequately implemented, the sheer presence of problems and multiple unconnected solutions are overwhelming’. This phenomenon is described by Graham (1997) as ‘initiative fatigue’.

Each of these possible explanations emerged from the evidence of the teachers’ initial attitude responses and provides three different perspectives on the pattern of declining engagement. As each stage in the implementation process is a decision point for teachers, the data relating to these stages will be used to comment on the veracity of each.

**Attendance at external training**

External introductory training was offered to early childhood teachers to support engagement with the literacy and pedagogy documents. The training sessions were fully funded by DoCS and attendance was voluntary. There was a decreasing availability of training from the literacy to the health initiative. About half of respondents attended the literacy and pedagogy initiative training (50% and 43%, respectively). We can draw few conclusions from these figures as the sample from which they are drawn was not representative of early childhood teachers across NSW. Hall and Hord (2001, p. 40), however, stated ‘if there is limited training and support for the change, it is likely that it will not be fully implemented’. Therefore, the diminished training opportunities with successive initiatives possibly provided a less-than-optimal environment for the initiation of engagement.

Opinions were sought from the teachers on how supportive they had found the training sessions. Though the responses represent the experiences of different training sessions, all the responses for the literacy initiative were positive. Responses indicated the literacy training had captured and communicated the main aims of the initiative and had been motivating. The training sessions for the pedagogy initiative received a mixed range of responses. The most frequent response identified the teachers’ reassurance of their current practice relative to the aims of this...
initiative. Other responses confirmed the existence of obsolescent practices, highlighting a diversity of practice. The training for this initiative also received a number of negative responses; for example, ‘Large sessions so not intimate enough to share ideas’. These negative attitude responses may have revealed factors that influence decisions on implementation and it is that stage of change we now address.

**Frequency of use of the curriculum initiative packages**

The design of each curriculum initiative broadly reflected a model for initiating a PLC (Hord, 1997). The design elements to support multiple internal learning experiences included the division of the documents into discrete sections, tasks to be undertaken, reflective questions and suggested further readings. At least six internal sessions, of one-hour duration, was an expectation for all of the curriculum initiatives. Internal group sessions and/or continued individual engagement with the curriculum initiative package could be expected to support implementation. As an indicator of these factors, teachers were asked how often they accessed the package on a four-point Likert scale.

The higher frequency of teachers accessing the literacy and the pedagogy initiatives (see Figure 2) suggests a higher engagement with these initiatives. When an initiative package was re-accessed, however, it did not necessarily occur frequently. This result suggests that the strategy of a series of internal professional development sessions conducted by each preschool was not widely adopted and that PLCs did not evolve.

**Adoption of the curriculum initiatives**

The number and type of changes teachers undertake during the process of implementation can indicate the breadth and depth of change (Hall & Hord, 2001). This small study did not seek to capture the fidelity of the adoption of an initiative. Instead, to examine the changes made by teachers, an open question requested teachers to list the ideas they had successfully adopted from each curriculum initiative. The responses reflected the aspects of each initiative that interested teachers and illuminated their conceptualisation of each initiative, through their practical applications within the early childhood context.

**Number of teachers who made adoptions**

The number of teachers within a community of potential adopters gives an insight into the relative success of an initiative (Rogers, 2003). A similar number of teachers adopted ideas from the literacy (48%) and pedagogy initiatives (52%), however there was a substantial decline in the number of teachers who undertook an adoption from the health initiative (8%). This result suggests that a similar number of teachers implemented the literacy and pedagogy initiative, but a low number implemented the health initiative.

**Number of adoptions**

The teachers nominated a total of 52 adoptions across the three curriculum initiatives over a three-year implementation period. There were 24 different ideas adopted from the literacy initiative, 25 from the pedagogy initiative and three from the health initiative. Within the context of this study, the number and type of adoptions as reported here broadly reflect the change activity each initiative initiated. The number of adoptions was similar for the literacy and pedagogy initiatives with a substantially lower number for the health initiative. This result builds on the alignment of attendance at external training and the number of teachers adopting an idea. This suggests a generalised stronger interest in the literacy and pedagogy initiatives and also further emphasises the continuity of the low levels of engagement with the health initiative.

**Unsuccessful adoptions**

For a deeper understanding of the factors impacting on teachers’ decision making, they were asked to identify any ideas that they tried and found unsuccessful. Adoptions that were unsuccessful give an insight into the elements of a curriculum initiative that teachers deemed useful and applicable to their context but in practice failed or were rejected. This question received a low response rate but the reasons given by the teachers for the unsuccessful adoptions give insight to some of the barriers to change these teachers experienced. Of the eight teachers who responded,
three identified unsuccessful adoptions for the literacy initiative, two teachers for pedagogy and one for the health innovation. It is interesting to note that none of the unsuccessful adoptions were nominated as successful by other teachers.

Further analysis revealed that a range of factors which are critical to a successful change process also acted as barriers to this process. Though few in number, these responses clearly identify a range of process and contextual factors that are recognised as key barriers to change:

- non-involvement or lack of interest of key stakeholders (Stoll & Fink, 1996)
- colleagues who have rejected initiatives (Anderson, 1997; Hall & Hord, 2001)
- difficulty in maintaining motivation (Garet et al., 2001)
- the overwhelming nature of multiple initiatives (Fullan, 1999)
- lack of knowledge of the change processes (Easton, 2008; Hall & Hord, 2001)
- lack of time (Little, 2001).

This result confirms that the barriers to change that operate in school settings also exist in preschools. The most frequent factor was the impact of others on the teacher—families, followed by other staff and government advisors. Combined, these barriers caused the similar response of partial implementation or the decision to abandon particular changes, resulting in the smothering of the process of change (Fullan, 1999; Lamie, 2004).

**Level of engagement with the curriculum initiatives**

Teachers who decided to implement an initiative can be divided by the levels of use (LoU) measure into four distinct levels (Hall & Hord, 2001). The questionnaire included a LoU question for each initiative. Teachers were asked to identify their present stage from a range of descriptive statements. The lower levels indicate a day-to-day adoption or adaption of an initiative and a surface level of change. The upper levels indicate teachers whose behaviours of reflection and collaboration show a more meaningful engagement.

Of the teachers who implemented the curriculum initiatives (see Figure 3), few moved beyond the mechanical level (Hall & Hord, 2001). The risk at this level is one of superficial implementation where the strategy or idea is directly adopted into practice with limited absorption of the underlying principles, contextualisation or integration. A low percentage of teachers were above this level, either modifying the adoptions or collaborating with other teachers. This result is aligned with the pattern of implementation by teachers in school contexts. Anderson (1997) found that teachers who were allowed autonomy in decision making about initiative adoption made multiple low-level changes across multiple initiatives, suggesting contextual factors that constrain teachers’ engagement also exist in preschools.

**Figure 3. Percentage of teachers who implemented an initiative measured using the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hall & Hord, 2001)—literacy (n = 17), pedagogy (n = 11), health (n = 3).**

This pattern of the LoU (Hall & Hord, 2001) responses also may be explained by the content characteristics of the individual curriculum initiatives. The literacy initiative rated very highly on the mechanical response, possibly due to the practical literacy experiences that were suited to direct adoption into the classroom. The pedagogy initiative, rated highly on the mid-LoU levels, reflecting this document’s content and absence of practical applications. The response to the health initiative’s highly structured health-promotion activities, from a limited implementation rate, induced an inverse result. The relatively high response in the LoU renewal level indicated the acceptance of the underlying health ideas of the initiative, but teachers had rejected the highly structured health activities and were devising alternative ways of addressing health promotion. This result is supported by the previously reported finding that the health strategies were not among the ideas teachers adopted from this initiative.

**Discussion**

The arrival of these curriculum initiatives in NSW preschools provoked a positive response from most teachers; they recognised these documents as a resource to support their role and practice. The result across the three initiatives though, showed a steady decline in initial positive attitudes, suggesting teachers were less positive as each initiative arrived. To explain this, we need to look at the teachers’ initial decision-making process following the arrival of each curriculum initiative package.
For curriculum initiatives, there are multiple decision points where a teacher can choose to engage with or reject an initiative (Rogers, 2003). These decisions occur throughout the implementation phase and are impacted upon by process, content or contextual factors. Three possible explanations for this group of teachers’ experiences of the three curriculum initiatives of this study have been proposed.

1. Process factors related to training and/or support structures were not adequate for the successful initiation of the curriculum initiative.

To initiate the process of change, DoCS provided external training for the literacy and pedagogy initiatives. Around half the teachers in this study attended the literacy and pedagogy training and most found it a positive experience. Though these training attendance rates are less than optimal, a further finding revealed that a similar percentage of teachers who attended training adopted an idea into their classroom practice. In contrast, no external training was offered for the health initiative. This initiative had a low level of positive attitudes and a low number of teachers adopted an idea from it. The combination of these findings suggests that, on balance, an adequate level of external training is one factor that may support a teacher’s initiation and implementation of a curriculum initiative.

Internal sessions based on the development of a PLC through multiple modules were the selected model for on-site professional learning. The teachers’ infrequent access to the initiative packages suggests that preschool teams did not widely adopt this strategy. This result may indicate that the professional development of teachers through self-initiated learning and modules is not suitable for the preschool context. Alternatively, the development of PLCs in early childhood contexts probably requires the multiple systemic and context supports as for schools (Bolam et al., 2005; Easton, 2008). Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) argue that if teachers cannot create collaborative learning environments for themselves, we cannot expect them to create this form of learning environment for children. Furthermore, the initiatives suggested a peer facilitate the internal sessions. For this to be an effective strategy, the peer has to be a high-quality teacher whose improved practices are observable (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009).

It would seem that the provision of fully funded external training for teachers contributed to teachers’ decisions to engage with two of the initiatives, although it is a less-than-effective strategy. This impact, however, needs to be viewed in the light of other factors that exist in the complex change milieu.

2. Content factors did not motivate the teachers’ engagement with the curriculum initiative.

The outstanding difference between each of the three curriculum initiatives was their content. The diverse focus on literacy, pedagogy and health promotion combined with a non-mandated status had the potential to engage teachers at varied rates and in pragmatic patterns. Rogers (2003) argues that a recipient’s interest or need governs the rate of implementation. Drawing on the results of the ideas teachers adopted, it would seem that the teachers had a higher level of interest in the literacy and pedagogy initiatives and very little interest in the health initiative. Also, the 52 adoptions were in alignment with the content of the curriculum initiatives, suggesting the content was effectively communicated to the teachers and/or university-qualified teachers are able interpreters of curriculum initiatives or the content was adaptable to their practice.

The teachers’ infrequent accessing of all the packages suggests that teachers were not motivated to adopt the intrinsic design of the packages. This lack of motivation to use the packages as designed may have adversely impacted on the level of engagement, limiting it to a mechanical level (Hall & Hord, 2001), constraining the development of behaviours such as collaboration that lead to higher levels of engagement. Motivation, interest and needs, however, have to coexist with the demands of the day-to-day role of a teacher.

3. Contextual factors, such as intensification of teachers’ work and/or timing of the initiatives’ arrival, negatively impacted on implementation.

The teachers who expressed a negative attitude to the arrival of new curriculum materials revealed factors that may have impacted on their engagement with the initiatives. They expressed a personal concern with their professional workload, the overwhelming content of the packages and a perceived lack of time. This result seems to suggest that early childhood teachers are experiencing an intensification of their workload and, for some teachers, this impacts on the priority they give to curriculum implementation and professional learning. Furthermore, these results reflected a limited change response to the curriculum initiatives, suggesting that teachers dipped into the packages and “cherry-picked” ideas to meet their day-to-day needs.

Teachers who reported unsuccessful adoptions identified a range of common contextual barriers to change. The existence of factors, such as non-involvement of families and the active resistance of some staff, may have limited the number and type of adoptions made by teachers and the development of collaborative learning environments.
An additional factor that may be involved in the declining positive attitudes is the presence of the underlying phenomenon of innovation fatigue (Graham, 1997). Though this could be partially explained by the declining rate of provision for training, the steady decrease in positive attitudes seems to indicate the negative influence of the arrival of a second and then a third initiative within a 19-month period.

**Conclusion**

This group of teachers has illuminated how curriculum initiatives are understood and implemented by early childhood teachers. Even with well-designed high-quality packages, these teachers showed that ‘getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is often very difficult’ (Rogers, 2003, p. 1). Overall, these results indicate that the number of teachers engaged at the initiation stage remains stable throughout the implementation phase. Conversely, teachers who are not engaged at initiation are unlikely to engage at later stages. This suggests that the decisions teachers make at the initiation stage act as signposts for curriculum innovations as they seem to lead to continued engagement or irrecoverable rejection.

At this time of national change, the Australian Government has the opportunity to select quality standards that support effective professional learning environments to facilitate the engagement of early childhood teachers with the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). Standards that promote the importance of early childhood teachers’ learning, as well as adequately funded strategies that support effective learning experiences that address the interrelated process, content and contextual factors, may carry the potential to affect the decisions of a great number of teachers.

**References**


Introduction

Social support is a complex concept concerned with aspects of a person’s social relationships. It can be defined as either the number of relationships enacted (that is, received support) or how these relationships are experienced (that is, perceived support). Perceived support can refer to both emotional support (for example, providing understanding, encouragement, acceptance) and instrumental support (for example, providing practical information). Of particular interest was how the nature of communication between mothers and ECPs influences maternal feelings of support. ECPs in the study were defined as all early childhood staff—unqualified and qualified—identified by the mothers as working with their child in the centre. Quantitative data obtained by surveys and questionnaires was augmented by case studies of selected mothers based on interviews. It was found that most mothers perceived ECPs to be a source of social support, and that the content and frequency of mother–ECP communication determined how much support mothers considered they received. The case studies provided evocative insights into what it is like for mothers to ‘be’ in supportive and unsupportive childcare spaces. Among other things, the outcomes of this study encourage policy-makers and ECPs to consider the extent to which childcare services provide social support for mothers, and how they might identify those who have the greatest need for it.

It is critically important that the social support role of ECPs be understood, given the increasing numbers of infants and young children attending child care (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Parenting can be challenging and parenting stress increases the risk of maladaptive parenting (Calkins, Hungerford & Dedmon, 2004), negatively influencing the quality of parent–child relationships (Williford, Calkins & Keane, 2007). Social support reduces maternal stress (Asberg, Vogel & Bowers, 2008) and increases parenting competence (Verhoeven, Junger, Van Aken, Dekovic & Van Aken, 2007). Perceived support predicts coping effectiveness (Terry, Rawle & Callan, 1995) and parenting satisfaction (Thompson & Walker, 2004). Maternal levels of perceived support better predict attitudes to child rearing than any other child or maternal characteristic (Rodrigo, Martin, Maiquez & Rodriguez, 2007). Importantly for the present study, this predictive relationship holds true, not only for within-family supports (for example, partner support) but for outside-home supports, such as schools (American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force on the Family, 2003).
Child care has been identified as a potential source of support for parents (Lee, Halpern, Hertz-Picciotto, Martin & Suchindran, 2006) and the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005) emphasises that trusting and supportive family/centre partnerships are essential if positive developmental outcomes for children are to be achieved. The QIAS encourages family participation and involvement and QIAS principles state that active communication that is open and extensive is necessary if strong partnerships with families are to be built and maintained. However, few published studies have investigated systematically the social support role of ECPs (Bromer & Henly, 2004; Shpancer, 1999), and these have been limited in an Australian context.

Two ways of conceptualising the social support function of early childhood services have been advanced (Shpancer, 1999). Drawing on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the first is based on the view that the nature of child care—and the shared care role that inevitably brings parents and ECPs together in matters of child health, development and wellbeing—ensures that ECPs become key members of a parent’s social support network. Shpancer (1999) termed this the ‘social support hypothesis’. In contrast, the second approach—termed the ‘buffer hypothesis’—proposes that parents who choose centre-based child care (rather than informal care by family, friends or neighbours, or home-based family day care) do so deliberately to maintain ‘social distance’ from their child’s caregivers (Shpancer, 1999, p. 2). They turn to caregivers for support only when absolutely necessary, such as when negative events occur at child care (for example, ongoing tantrums by the child when brought to child care). Within this view, ECPs are unlikely to become members of a parent’s support network. Contact beyond what is needed to maintain a satisfactory service is considered unnecessary and may even be actively avoided by parents to minimise their sense of caregiver intrusion or competition. According to this hypothesis, ECP–parent relations in formal child care are ‘consumer/professional service provider exchange systems’ (Shpancer, 1999, p. 2).

There is some empirical support for both hypotheses. In support of the social support hypothesis, Britner and Phillips (1995) found that most parents viewed child care as a source of social support and, furthermore, that ‘social support from the childcare provider was the best predictor of satisfaction for parents’ (p. 1135). More recently, Cahan and Bromer (2003, as cited by Bromer and Henly, 2004) reported that ECPs do provide social support to parents, and that parents are increasingly seeking this support. Teacher–parent relationships can be intense sources of emotional and personal support (White, 2002). In relation to the buffer hypothesis, ‘professionalism’ in early childhood services has been described by some as ‘emotional distance from the client [and] limit setting on personal involvement and helping’ (Bromer & Henly, 2004, p. 950). To the extent that these beliefs exist amongst ECPs, they may work against forms of help-giving and personal involvement that promote feelings of support. Shpancer’s own research (1999) supported the buffer hypothesis: 96% of parents did not identify ECPs as part of their social support network.

By gaining a better understanding of how the social support role of ECPs is perceived by mothers in an Australian context and how this is linked to communication, this study aims to contribute to the wellbeing of families and better outcomes for infants and young children in child care.

**Method**

A sequential mixed-methods research design was used (Mac Naughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). A survey-based, quantitative study investigated perceived support and communication in 40 mother–ECP relationships. Two mothers (one very high and the other very low on measures of perceived support) were then selected for in-depth qualitative case studies.

**Participants**

Forty mothers whose eldest child was aged 18–36 months and experiencing their first childcare placement participated. All children attended at least 16 hours per week and had more than three months experience in child care—defined for this study as an accredited centre-based long day childcare service. Only first child/mother families were included to control for possible effects of previous maternal experiences and different sibling dynamics. Although the term ‘child care’ is used throughout this article, participants generally used ‘day care’ to describe their child’s centre, and therefore this term was used in all data collection documents. All families resided in metropolitan areas within the Australian state of Victoria.

**Instruments**

Perceived social support survey

A modified version of the perceived social support scale (PSSS) (Procidano & Heller, 1983) was used to measure maternal perceptions of support. The PSSS measures whether needs for support, information and feedback are fulfilled by friends and family. The 15-item scale consists of declarative statements such as: ‘My friends are sensitive to my personal needs’ and ‘I rely on my friends for emotional support’. The scale was modified in two ways for the purposes of this study. First, all items were modified to refer to ECPs rather than family or friends; for instance, ‘Day care staff are sensitive to
my personal needs’ rather than ‘Friends are sensitive to my personal needs’. Secondly, the original three-option response format—yes/no/don’t know—was modified to a standard 5-point Likert scale—strongly disagree (–2) to strongly agree (+2). The possible range of scores on the modified PSSS was –30 to +30.

Communication questionnaire

Each mother also completed a communication questionnaire—over an agreed, representative one-week period—developed by the second author. Communication was defined as any verbal or written exchange between ECPs and the mother, regardless of who initiated it. Verbal exchanges included face-to-face and telephone conversations and formal meetings/conferences. Written communication included emails, newsletters, communication books and letters. Mothers provided detailed information about the frequency, mode (how the spoken or written interaction took place) and who they communicated with at the centre (director, caregiver or assistant). Pseudonyms only were used. They also reported on topic content, categorised as routine greetings, child-focused topics, home-related topics and adult-focused topics. Finally, mothers appraised their level of satisfaction with these exchanges, and feelings about the possible benefits of, and barriers to, them.

Case study interviews

The aim of the semi-structured telephone interviews was to gather qualitative case study data on high and low support relationships. The interviewer (second author) developed a brief interview protocol but the wording and order of questions varied somewhat between the interviews. The tone of the interviews was conversational and lasted 60–90 minutes. Mothers were encouraged to discuss their feelings about being supported by ECPs, how their communication with ECPs influenced their perceptions of social support, and how other factors, including specific events and involvement in childcare social networks, impacted on the supportive nature of the childcare centre.

Notes were taken during the interviews under predetermined topic and issue headings and elaborations were made immediately afterwards. These notes were sent to participants for verification and amendment as needed, then signed and returned. They were then subjected to manual theme and content analysis (Edwards, 2001) with mothers’ responses assigned to categories, then themes as they emerged from the data.

Procedure

Potential participants were initially identified through the second author’s personal contacts. Additional participants were identified by ‘snowballing’ (word of mouth). Telephone contact was made with each mother. Those interested in participating were mailed an instruction letter, plain language statement, consent form, PSSS and communication questionnaire. Mothers returned the completed material in a prepaid envelope within two weeks.

Maternal responses on the PSSS and communication questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and t-tests (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences—SPSS) were used to investigate associations between communication characteristics and PSSS scores. Once quantitative data analyses were complete, two mothers were selected based on their extreme scores (very high and very low) on the PSSS and approached regarding consent to participate in a telephone interview. Both consented, thus enabling high- and low-support relationships to be examined more closely via qualitative case studies.

Results

Quantitative results are presented in three sections:

■ mothers’ overall perceptions of ECPs as a source of social support (PSSS scores)
■ characteristics of mother–ECP communication (form, frequency and content) and relationships between them
■ relationships between PSSS scores, mother–ECP communication and maternal satisfaction with communication.

Qualitative data is then presented in the form of two case studies (pseudonyms only are used).

Mothers’ perceptions of ECPs as a source of social support

The distribution of PSSS scores was consistent with a normal distribution with an adequate range (–19.00 to 29.00) and a mean score of 7 (standard deviation = 13.67). Participants were categorised into four groups according to mean PSSS scores: very unsupportive (–16 to –30), unsupportive (–1 to –15), supportive (1 to 15) and very supportive (16 to 30). It was found that 64.5% of participants perceived ECPs to be supportive or very supportive, 30.0% of participants perceived ECPs to be unsupportive and only 5.5% of participants perceived ECPs to be very unsupportive. Hence, the majority of this sample perceived ECPs to be supportive.

Characteristics of mother–ECP communication

The results obtained for mother–ECP communication were analysed in regard to frequency (times per week), form (written versus verbal communication) and content (routine greetings, child-focused topics, home-related topics and adult-focused topics).
Communication frequency and form

All mothers spoke face to face with ECPs at least once during the week and all but one spoke with ECPs at least daily. More than 50% engaged in five or more conversations and 95% spoke with ECPs at least three to five times per week. For 60% of mothers this was the only verbal communication form. The telephone was the second most frequently used form.

Daily written communication with ECPs occurred for 82.5% of mothers and only 5% did not engage in any written communication. Of the mothers who exchanged written communications, 47% used only one form—communication books. Equal amounts of verbal and written communication were reported by 30% of mothers, whereas 70% of mothers reported that they used verbal communication more frequently than written communication. No mothers reported using written more than verbal communication.

Communication content

Using the four main content categories—routine greetings, child-focused topics, home-related topics and adult-focused topics—we found that 35% of mothers communicated about all four topics, and only 12.5% of mothers communicated about one topic only. All mothers exchanged information about child-focused topics, 87.5% used routine greetings and 45% addressed home-related topics. Just over one-third (37.5%) included adult-focused topics. When mothers only communicated with ECPs about one topic, that topic was always child-focused.

Mothers whose communication involved two topics included child-focused topics and routine greetings. Mothers whose communications included three topics addressed child-focused topics, routine greetings and either adult- or home-focused topics.

Relationships between mother–ECP communication characteristics

When communication frequency, form and topic content were considered together, we found that the more frequently mothers communicated with ECPs, the more likely it was that they covered a greater variety of topics. Mothers also addressed more topics in verbal than in written modes (47.5%). One-third of the mothers spoke about all four topics in their verbal communication with professionals, in contrast to only 18% who addressed four topics in written modes. Most mothers used verbal communication to exchange adult- or home-related information.

Relationships between PSSS scores, mother–ECP communication and maternal satisfaction with communication

Mothers who conversed more than five times per week with ECPs perceived their centre as more supportive \((t(38) = 7.38, p < 0.0001)\). Similarly, the more topics mothers communicated about, the higher their perceptions of support \((F(39) = 49.82, p < 0.0001)\) for verbal communication; \(F(39) = 39.26, p < 0.0001\) for all communication forms. The more satisfied mothers were with ECP communication, the higher their perceived support \((F(38) = 27.09, p < 0.0001)\). Of particular importance was daily (on average) mother–ECP written communication \((t(38) = 4.56, p < 0.0001)\) and communication that included adult- and/or home-focused topics \((t(38) = 9.61, p < 0.0001)\). Neither the number of days attended nor length of time in care were related to PSSS scores.

Case studies

Qualitative data based on the two mothers selected for further interview (one with a very high PSSS score and one with a very low score) are presented below in the form of case studies. First, the responses of each mother in terms of communication and perceived support are summarised separately to provide an overall sense of the key differences between their experiences. Then their responses in relation to the role of the centre director, ECP availability and other communication characteristics of importance to them in determining their perceived support are compared and contrasted.

Hatty—high social support (PSSS score = 29)

Hatty had been using child care for five months and her daughter attended four days per week. She was highly satisfied with ECP communication and support. She communicated about all topic areas, spoke with ECPs at least five times and engaged in three to five written exchanges with them per week.

Hatty’s interview data revealed that her feelings of support and extensive communication with ECPs were not ‘ready-made’. They emerged over time as she became more comfortable and as ‘friendships’ developed. Initially, most of her verbal interactions were greetings, some were child-focused and a few related to home-focused topics. Later, more frequent communication about her personal life (adult and home topics) occurred and there was ‘greater depth’ in these communications. By asking her questions about lots of different topics, ECPs made her feel they were ‘interested in how she thinks and feels’. Communication was ‘enjoyable’ and conversations were ‘friendly’ in tone. The efforts of ECPs to initiate conversations and to call her by name made her feel ‘important’ and ‘recognised as a person’. She felt ‘welcomed, comfortable, valued and supported’.

Even conversations about routine matters—‘small talk’—kept her up to date with what was happening at the centre. ECPs were ‘reliable informants’ about changes, including rostering, and she felt valued.
because she always knew who would be caring for her child. If there were changes she was ‘told about them beforehand’. It was communication about child-focused matters that most strongly influenced Hatty’s feelings of support, such as when ECPs made ‘nice little comments’ to her about her parenting style and when they said positive things to her about her child. ECPs were also a good source of information and ideas. They reminded her of immunisations and safety issues, such as toys being recalled. When she needed someone to talk to about her concerns, they listened and gave her contact details for additional support outside of the centre if needed.

Hatty spoke of how communicating with the ECPs about adult and home-related topics helped her to get to know them and develop friendships. She felt they ‘put effort’ into learning about her child, her family and herself. Most of the ECPs had children themselves and they related their own experiences as parents: ‘It feels good to have someone who understands what I’m going through’. She felt valued and trusted by the personal experiences the professionals shared with her. Hatty also felt knowledgeable about social activities based at the centre: ‘It is a great place to meet other parents, and make new friends’. Hatty appreciated the opportunity for communication within this centre-based network.

Nancy—low social support (PSSS score = −19)

Nancy’s daughter had been attending the centre for four months and attended three days per week. She was very unsatisfied with ECP communication and support, and the two were highly interrelated. She spoke with ECPs three to five times and had one written exchange per week. She communicated about routine matters and child-focused topics only.

For Nancy, in contrast to the experiences of Hatty, ECPs provided a ‘child supervision-only’ arrangement. Like Hatty, her communication and feelings of support changed over time, but in her case it was a change for the worse. Nancy’s communications with ECPs had reduced in frequency since her daughter started. At first, she had been enthusiastic and always made an effort to talk, but given their limited responses, her attempts to talk reduced in frequency. Communication about routine matters was also unsatisfactory as she felt she was not informed about changes that occurred, including who would be looking after her child. It was hard to communicate because of ‘frequent staff turnover’. Even when she was informed of staff changes, she did not feel that she knew ‘who they were’ and as a result, it was ‘impossible’ to form relationships with them. She ‘wanted the professionals to communicate frequently with her and to show an interest in her personally, to greet her and be friendly to her’. Her communications with ECPs were mostly ‘one-way: parent to ECP’. Written information was sent home but it was mostly about administrative matters.

Nancy was also unsatisfied with communication about child-focused topics: ‘It is hard to find out what my daughter has done each day’. She was only given a broad overview and this was not personalised; it was given to all parents. Nancy wanted daily written information and daily conversations with ECPs to inform her ‘exactly what her child had done’. She felt that this would have supported her and enabled her to develop smoother centre–home transitions for her child.

On occasions when she had asked ECPs for advice, it was not provided. When she had tried to talk to them about some parenting concerns, they were unresponsive. Nancy wanted to be supported by the ECPs and to be given information on child development and parenting—for example, advice on snacks and sleep patterns—but did not feel that her personal needs were met consistently. An instance of this was when she requested that her daughter only use her dummy at nap times, however when she picked her up, ‘she was playing with it in her mouth’.

Nancy did not communicate with the ECPs about adult or home-related topics but would have done so if she felt comfortable with them. She felt awkward when she confided in them about the death of their family pet. She was very upset about this at the time but the ECPs did not stop their activities to look at her when she was speaking and did not offer words of support.

In contrast to ECPs in Hatty’s centre, Nancy’s ECPs did not share personal experiences in caring for children. Nancy wanted to know more about them on a ‘personal level’. As it stood, she felt that she ‘didn’t have much in common with them’, that ECPs ‘were not interested in her or her family’ and they did not ask her about her home life. She felt they paid ‘little attention to her’, what she had to say and were not interested in ‘her needs or home routines’. This undermined any feelings Nancy had about being in control of her child’s care at the centre. She wanted to communicate about some home-related issues as this would help ECPs better understand and care for her child. She wanted opportunities to socialise with other parents, as this would help parents to get together and support each other, but no such opportunities were offered.

The role of the director

Hatty felt very secure in her relationship with the centre’s director who showed personalised attention and interest in her and her family. The director always made time to talk and encouraged all parents to write their suggestions, comments or concerns in the ‘suggestions box’ or email her. In contrast, Nancy felt that the director of her centre was ‘cold and...
unapproachable’ and that she ‘didn’t feel comfortable’ talking with her. The director was difficult to contact; she was always busy or had her office door closed and when telephoned, she was either not there or unavailable.

ECP availability

The ECPs in Hatty’s centre always talked to her, albeit briefly, at drop-off and pick-up times. Her child’s ‘primary caregiver’ (the staff member she identified as the one most often caring for her child) was always available to talk if needed and ECPs were always willing to make time to talk with her privately. Nancy, on the other hand, ‘did not know who to talk to about concerns’ she had. She said that her child’s caregivers kept changing and ECPs were unavailable when she wanted to talk. She said that at pick-up and drop-off times they were ‘always busy with other children or talking with other parents’.

Other communication characteristics

ECPs talked to Hatty in private about personal matters and she felt secure that conversations were confidential; she had never heard them ‘gossiping’. She trusted them because they were open and honest and were ‘great listeners’ who gave her her full attention. They acted on and responded to things she talked about and they guided her rather than told her what to do. They made good suggestions, explained their ideas and then encouraged her to decide on the best option for her. ECPs used ‘kind words’ and this made her feel that they cared. When they addressed concerns about her child’s behaviour, Hatty felt that they carefully chose their words. When she required extra support, they made ‘action’ plans and followed through. They dealt with her daughter’s behavioural problems openly and with sensitivity. In addition, the professionals supported her decisions. When Hatty decided to keep her daughter up for the whole day they supported her, even though they thought she would probably have benefitted from a nap.

Nancy, on the other hand, had heard the ECPs talk negatively about each other and other parents in public spaces and so did not trust them. Some parents were favoured over others. Those who were ‘liked’ talked to the ECPs and got ‘better attention’ than others. ECPs did not give her the moral support she needed and were not always honest with her. She had experienced inconsistencies in what they said about her child’s behaviour. On the few occasions when ECPs did respond to her questions, they would not explain themselves well and used unfamiliar, difficult words that made her feel uncomfortable. When she had asked for advice, they did not follow up and when she telephoned, staff were slow to return the call.

Summary of results

In this study, most mothers perceived ECPs to be a source of social support. When mothers frequently conversed with professionals and written communication occurred daily, perceptions of social support were higher. Case studies revealed that open, honest, respectful, reliable, friendly and helpful communication was an important vehicle by which perceived support developed. Over time, what could be described as professional friendships emerged when communication was positive and nurtured feelings of trust.

Discussion

This study has found that communication (and relationship) quality determines how much support (or lack of support) mothers experience in the formal childcare context. While the existing literature indicates that the social support role of ECPs in centre-based care is complicated by multiple-caregiver structures (Shpancer, 1999) and high staff turnover (Kisker, Hofferth, Phillips & Farquhar, 1991), these results show that mothers benefit from close relationships with professionals, supporting Shpancer’s (1999) social support hypothesis and adding urgency to current practice and policy initiatives in this area. For example, Jenkins and Jeavons (1999) and Hayden and Macdonald (2000) have argued that early childhood settings are perfect locations for health promotion and that there is a need to link this concept with quality of care and the wellbeing of children, parents and ECPs.

Based on the outcomes of this study, recommendations for ECPs include:

- emphasising the importance of daily verbal communication with families
- recognising the importance of written communication moving beyond administrative matters and tailored to meet individual family needs
- establishing processes so that all families can identify at least one ECP that is available for all communication
- emphasising the importance of maintaining professional boundaries in order to establish trust and to avoid unethical issues, such as gossiping behind parents’ backs.

At the macro level, there is a need for pre-service and in-service training initiatives that conceptualise more completely the very complex and demanding social support roles enacted by ECPs. Assisting ECPs as they develop their professional views on their roles and how they might best enact professionalism that blends appropriate emotional boundaries with genuinely supportive, effective connections is essential.
Qualitative data indicate that it is the senior hierarchical position of director that establishes the culture of support. How the process of establishing and affirming such a culture occurs warrants further, systematic investigation.

There is also a need for further research on how childcare services can best promote wellbeing through social support of mothers with special needs, including those who are experiencing depression and those whose personal networks are limited or conflictual. Of relevance here is research that outside-family support may be all the more critical for some families, since these sources may be less interpersonally complex than some familial supports; for example, some mother–daughter relationships (Bunting & McAuley, 2004).

The current study extends previous research by Britner and Phillips (1995), who also reported that parental perceptions of social support from their childcare setting were the best predictors of parental satisfaction with care. However, Britner and Phillips (1995) sampled parents whose children were in full-time care. The current study indicates this social support role may also hold true for mothers of children aged between 18 months and three years using childcare part time. This is particularly relevant in the Australian context where only 7% of children under the age of five years are in formal centre-based childcare arrangements for 35 hours or more per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

A concerning finding to emerge from case study data was the problematic nature of some mother–ECP communications. This is consistent with other research reporting difficulties within parent–professional communication in Australian childcare settings (Ebbeck & Glover, 1998; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2002). It has been found that ECPs are often unwilling to talk to parents (Huira, 1996) and seldom know the best way to communicate with them (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2002; Wright-Sexton, 1996).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that when parent–professional communications are direct, personal and two-way, outcomes are improved. Interview data from the present study provides further evidence that this is so and supports findings that trusting parent–professional relationships are built through regular personal communication (Hayden, De Gioia &Hadley, 2003; Wise, 2007) and are strengthened by sharing and/ or seeking of information (Owen, Barfoot &Ware, 2000). Specific strategies such as ‘sharing stories’ have been identified in positive parent–professional partnerships in Australia (Smith, 2001) and in United States Head Start programs (Chang, Muckelroy & Pulido-Tobiassen, 2000). Timing (Hand & Wise, 2006; Wise 2007) and mode and manner of communication (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2001; Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2002; Wise, 2007) have also been identified, but until now, their efficacy has been ‘unknown’ (Wise & Sarason, 2000, p. 18).

There are several limitations of this study. These include the exclusion of fathers and other significant family members, and there were no direct observations or assessments made of care quality, including mother–ECP interactions and relationships. Furthermore, due to limited time and resources, this study did not explore how differences in a mother’s personality, marital status, ethnicity and demographic characteristics influenced perceived support, or how perceptions of social support change over time. The study did not gather information about the availability of other sources of social support for mothers, or their levels of perceived stress during the study period.

The study also did not consider characteristics of the children. The support needs of a mother whose child presents with a disability or demonstrates severe behavioural difficulties could differ to those whose children do not have these additional needs. It could be reasoned that a particularly challenging child may lead a mother to question her parenting skills or, in some cases, may lead mothers to avoid any relationship for fear of being judged as a bad parent (Joffe, 1977). How these variables influence mother–professional communication and maternal perceptions of support warrants further investigation.

The findings of this study indicate there is a need to explore in more depth the proposition put by Owen et al. (2000) that relationships between parents and ECPs are strengthened through interactions that involve the sharing of particular types of information. In the present study, the sharing of personal experiences was linked to higher levels of perceived support. By further examining links between mother–ECP communication and perceived social support in the light of what has here been called ‘professional friendships’, a new way of ‘doing’ professional relationships may well emerge.

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Culturally strong childcare programs for Indigenous children, families and communities

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**ACCOMMODATING THE DIVERSE CHILDCARE needs of Australia’s Indigenous communities, both within mainstream and Indigenous-operated services, is a major concern for all Indigenous families and communities. Of particular concern in relation to formal child care is the need for programs to be culturally strong. Culturally strong programs incorporate the culturally based beliefs, values and practices, including child-rearing practices, of individuals, families and communities using that service. This paper, drawing upon a broad-based consultation funded by the Australian Government and conducted throughout 2005–06, addresses the key elements of what constitutes culturally strong childcare programs for Indigenous children, families and communities. In recognition of the heterogeneous nature of Indigenous Australians, the research methods included focus groups, community consultations, and interviews with key stakeholders in the childcare sector nationally in order to identify their positions. The research findings highlighted that those involved with childcare programs for Indigenous children, whether they are living in a remote community in the Northern Territory or in Redfern in Sydney, New South Wales, share a similar desire: that programs reflect the cultural knowledge and practices of their respective communities.**

**Introduction**

The provision of high-quality early learning and care experiences for Indigenous children is a national priority (SNAICC, 2005; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2005), and may ameliorate the significant disadvantages of Indigenous children in later life (Schorr, 1997). It is now widely recognised that experiences in a child’s first few years of life shape the developing brain and have a lifelong impact (Hutchins, Martin, Saggers & Sims, 2007; Mustard, 2008a; 2008b). The success of such experiences for Indigenous children, however, is dependent upon an approach which ensures childcare programs are developed and implemented in such a way that they are culturally strong (Hutchins et al., 2007; SNAICC, 2005). Where culturally strong programs are in place, these are identified as a great resource for the community and an example of best practice (SNAICC, 2005). For a childcare program to be considered culturally strong, it must incorporate the values of the culture in the care that is being provided. For a childcare program to be considered best practice, practices must be locally defined, culturally appropriate and relevant to the values of the local community. Furthermore, programs that are culturally appropriate and relevant are those identified by the local community as useful in connecting children with culture (Fasoli, L., Benbow, R., Deveraux, K., Falk, I., Harris, R., Hazard, M., et al., 2004; SNAICC, 2004a; SNAICC, 2005). Our purpose in this paper is to describe how Indigenous people perceive culturally strong programs, based upon a nationwide consultation funded by the Australian Government and conducted throughout 2005–06. We also review current literature on culturally strong programs; outline the methodology of our national consultations; present the results of our consultations; and discuss these in the context of the literature.

**Culturally strong programs**

Culturally strong programs incorporate a firm understanding of a community’s history, standards, beliefs, values and practices, together with the incorporation of these into the daily early learning and care experiences of children, families and communities (Hutchins et al., 2007; SNAICC, 2004; SNAICC, 2005).
Both the literature and our research revealed that there are a number of interrelated cultural values important to Indigenous peoples, which map onto the forms of care that occur within local communities (Fasoli et al., 2004). These values include: the central and connected position of the child (SNAICC, 2004a; SNAICC, 2005; Warrki Jarrinkaku ACRS Project Team, 2002; Wright, 2005); the involvement and inclusion of parents and families in childcare programs (Fasoli et al., 2004; Priest, Coleman-Sleep & Martin, 2005; SNAICC, 2004a; Wright, 2005); the formation of identity in child development (Fasoli et al., 2004; SNAICC, 2004a); and the role of elders (Saggers & Sims, 2005; Willsher & Clarke, 1995). Other important factors include: a focus on health, food and nutrition (SNAICC, 2004b); play and leisure (Fasoli et al., 2004; SNAICC, 2004b); transport (SNAICC, 2004a); and general facilities and resources (SNAICC, 2004a).

For programs to be best practice and culturally strong, these components need to be applied to the design of Indigenous childcare programs; without them, Indigenous families are unlikely to use formal childcare services (Fasoli et al., 2004).

**Indigenous concepts of childhood—the strong child**

A fundamental point of Indigenous cultures—the symbiotic child–community relationship—should be understood by policy-makers and program developers and form the basis of all programs aimed at building both strong communities and culturally strong childcare programs (SNAICC, 2004a). From an Indigenous perspective, children are embraced as naturally strong and are positioned as equal members of the community, with the right to act autonomously and to make their own decisions (Warrki Jarrinkaku ACRS Project Team, 2002). This does not suggest that the child is free from guidance. Instead, the responsibility is on the broad community to create and provide an environment which is nurturing and safe for children to freely explore their world, building on their inherent strengths rather than directing them. As such, children’s needs are not individualised or separated out from those of the community as a whole (SNAICC, 2004a; SNAICC, 2005; Waltja Tjutangku Palpayi Aboriginal Corporation, 2001; Warrki Jarrinkaku ACRS Project Team, 2002; Wright, 2005).

**The importance of family and community**

Supporting Indigenous children’s sense of identity through programs that keep them connected to family and community is an example of best practice (Priest et al., 2005; SNAICC, 2004a). For Indigenous people, family includes the most immediate members of the child’s environment—mothers, fathers and siblings—but equally includes aunties, uncles, cousins, grandparents, family established by kinship systems and other members of the community with whom the child is in contact (Warrki Jarrinkaku ACRS Project Team, 2002). Involving such a broad range of people in children’s care facilitates the development of networks of skills, knowledge and experience—often referred to as ‘social capital’ or ‘hidden resource factors’ (Fasoli et al., 2004, p. 34)—which family members can draw upon to obtain advice on a range of issues. Research shows that the inclusion of parents and family members in childcare programs provides an opportunity for parents to receive support in their child-rearing roles, helping them to provide for children’s needs, including food and nutrition, hygiene, nappy changing, sleep routines, developmental needs, early education and so forth (Wright, 2005, p. 114). Such support is vital for parents of the Stolen Generations and others who suffered childhood maltreatment, aggression and abuse and who can unwittingly pass these onto children (Gordon, Hallahan & Henry, 2002).

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2004a) has argued that developing and supporting the community through building knowledge of good parenting strategies fits strengths-based child–community approaches and includes promotion of the childcare facility itself. Any benefits here will flow to the child; in this sense, best practice programs support and nurture parents alongside children.

**Child development and identity formation**

While child development refers to the whole child, including their ‘health, education and culture’ (Fasoli et al., 2004, p. 181), the most important aspect of development for Indigenous children is their identity (SNAICC, 2004a). Secure identity formation, which contributes to the child’s overall wellbeing, is dependent upon the inclusion of culture and tradition, as well as the inclusion of the development of their spiritual, emotional, social and physical aspects (Priest et al., 2005; SNAICC, 2004a). Other connected elements of identity are pride in self and the community, self-esteem and confidence (Priest et al., 2005; SNAICC, 2005.) Identity formation for children requires the provision of a safe and nurturing environment wherein children are free to explore the self in relation to others and the environment, through connection with social and physical elements—people, parents, siblings, family, community and nature (Fasoli et al., 2004; Martin, 1994; Priest et al., 2005). It also includes the need to protect the fundamental ‘relatedness’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (Priest et al., 2006). Culturally strong childcare programs thus provide an environment for ‘relatedness’ to be rebuilt or sustained, particularly in community settings where this has been disrupted (Fasoli et al., 2004; Martin, 1994; Priest et al., 2005).
The link between secure identity formation and the privileging of the child’s first language has also been made (Fasoli et al., 2004; SNAICC, 2004a; 2005). While it is now recognised that many young Indigenous children grow up in linguistically rich and complex environments, with multiple Indigenous languages being spoken nationally (Penman, 2006), Fasoli and colleagues (2004) suggest that a service cannot be culturally safe if it is not addressing the child’s first language. Despite the difficulties associated with these complexities, where identifiable language use is relevant and expected within a community, it is an important part of program development (Fasoli et al., 2004).

The role of Elders

Preparation for future roles within the community is a significant aim of Indigenous child care (Saggers & Sims, 2005). This includes guidance and learning through dedicated channels, such as appropriate and trusted role models, of social rules and obligations. Elders and other respected members of the community are central to teaching children the importance of maintaining relationships and the role of social behaviour; this includes helping children learn about respect, and teaching them how to regulate their own behaviours. The focus, however, is not solely on the child, but on guarding of rules of social interaction and conduct for the whole community (Saggers & Sims, 2005). Elders, therefore, have a special role in teaching cultural traditions; documenting knowledge for the child’s ongoing cultural identity development; developing the child’s sense of personal history through their presence and by relating stories and songs; and through their listening skills.

Learning of mainstream skills and values

In order to respond to the realities of mainstream domination, many contemporary Indigenous cultural groups recognise the importance of exposure to mainstream values and learning (SNAICC, 2004a). The suggestion is that, for Indigenous children to ‘survive’ in the dominant mainstream culture, it is necessary that they are taught formal mainstream skills and values in order to strengthen their resilience in their transition to school. Programs for Indigenous children that mirror mainstream programs for early education—supporting basic skills for literacy and numeracy, and general school readiness, complemented with formal activities, such as painting, drawing, gluing, cut-outs, and the like—are thus important components of formal child care (SNAICC, 2005). SNAICC (2005) also suggests programs for school readiness include children visiting or being in regular contact with their siblings at preschool and school.

Other program factors

Other program factors considered important components of best practice, culturally strong programs include: health, food and nutrition (SNAICC, 2004b); play and leisure (Fasoli et al., 2004; SNAICC, 2004b); transport (SNAICC, 2004a); and general facilities and resources (SNAICC, 2004a). The inclusion of these factors in the design of services is as essential as the above-mentioned factors in terms of their enabling as wide a participation rate of Indigenous children as possible in those services.

Methodology

The research was conducted with attention to ethical guidelines with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as articulated by the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (2003) Values and ethics: Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. These guidelines require all researchers to conduct their work according to Indigenous priorities and processes, and with respect to Indigenous values. Ethical approval to undertake the research was granted by Edith Cowan University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. Importantly, the broad research team included Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with many years’ experience working with Indigenous communities.

The national sample comprised Indigenous childcare providers (n = 202), Indigenous community members (n = 210), and state and territory government representatives (n = 66). To achieve maximum variation in each state and territory, a minimum of one capital city consultation and one rural/remote consultation of service providers and community members was included. Metropolitan consultations were held during SNAICC’s state/territory conferences, where possible. Rural/regional/remote sites were nominated by SNAICC, the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) (now Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) and state and territory government representatives.

Because a range of team members was involved in the data collection, three semi-structured interview guides were used to obtain qualitative data from the focus group discussions and individual consultations. Each guide was made relevant to participant groups, community members, childcare and Indigenous networks, service providers, and government representatives, respectively. For community members, the general style and wording of questions, as well as our interview approach, were piloted with a reference group. After the pilot, adjustments were made to ensure the interviewing style was appropriate and in line with our general context and purpose, and
this final version was approved by the institutional Ethics Committee. However, to note, actual interview questions evolved as the data collection proceeded to follow local themes and adjust to local needs. In most cases, where appropriate and consensual, focus group and interview discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and observations collected by interviewers when visiting communities and government were a further source of data.

Limitations of the data collection included time constraints, the limited sample and the contested role of government at the consultations. Many participants raised their objections to the presence of FaCSIA staff at the consultations and may have been less able to voice their opinions as a result. Nevertheless, most consultations generated robust and exhaustive deliberations.

The analysis was performed through a team process wherein team members, who were responsible for recording their own interviews/focus groups, were involved in reducing these by transcribing components and combining these transcripts with their extensive field notes and observations. This data was then coded by an independent analyst into thematic categories and the coded data brought to team meetings, undergoing constant review and discussions. Written drafts were then combined and organised under the headings reported below.

The consultations

Family support

Many participants noted the centrality of Indigenous children in community and family life, stressing that services for children must include services and/or support for the whole family/community:

> It’s about a children’s service and a family service. If we have something in place to help adults nurture yourself then you can be better carers for children—you can’t care for children if you are not feeling good about yourself … as a parent I don’t know what I would do without these people to talk to—I’ve been through everything here—I got married here, I had children here, I’m about to get divorced here—I couldn’t manage without the centre (community consultation, metropolitan).

Strengths include the more flexible delivery programs, such as Family First programs. So services are delivered to children via services delivered to families. That seems to be an accessible and successful model (government consultation, metropolitan).

Family support involves a range of issues from a practical nature:

> A parent brought her child into the centre with pilchers on and no nappy. When she [the carer] chatted to the mum, she found out that mum didn’t have any dry nappies. X suggested that mum bring the nappies in and they would dry them in the centre’s dryer (service provider consultation, regional);

and all things in-between:

> Many parents coming to X are not tapped into support services … it’s a one-stop shop where specialist children’s services come to X, child assessment, speech therapy for parents/grandparents who work hard to get to all different appointments so to have them done at X; they can go to work knowing it can all be done (community, metropolitan).

An important component of programs to support family involvement is the building of trust within formalised service settings:

> There’s huge trust issues if the mothers aren’t there to see what happens at the centre. They’d feel safer if there was other members of the family there; the baby can’t express what their needs are and this is highly important … Family members should be present as this creates trust … It needs to be holistic and have a whole family aspect … the more the better to have family involved and working there and offer security to the children within the centre so the more the better … if a family relation is there, in particular, we would like this, we would like to send our children there with them anyway … (community, metropolitan).

Family involvement is also the key for the promotion of services:

> We need to promote the idea that going to child care is good for children. Promote the importance of the facility. Where it’s going, the set-up, safety, activities offered. Word of mouth—children going to preschool so others go there (government, metropolitan).
Programs that kept siblings in contact were highly valued by many community participants:

*Should be able to have newborns, all ages until they start school all together … it’s better to keep kids together rather than separated … some have little rooms and big rooms but you should be able to let kids run in and out. They know who is supposed to be in here; it’s okay to keep them separated for sleep, but better to have old and little kids together and not to separate them on the basics. A lot of families have cousins and the families that should all be together, shouldn’t be separated by siblings … the kids get a shock when the little child’s separated. [One person related a story about her child getting a shock to be alone and separated] … and is still suffering now from being separated from their siblings … all ages together is better and not to be so harsh on separating when people come from big families … there’s a risk of hurting younger ones, but carers and older kids should be able to teach and learn how to deal with young kids in a controlled environment (community, metropolitan).*

The role of Elders

Involving Elders in childcare programs is the direct way to ensure cultural identity is passed on to children:

*Confidence in children comes from the parents and grandparents (government, metropolitan).*

*Being proud of being blackfellas … We have muttonbird season, NAIDOC [National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee] week, all different celebrations, land handovers, bush tucker, ancestors talk about them and what they did in their day and how different it is now, talk about music instruments, weapons, tools, back to basics, land ownership, family tree, pictures in the room where all the people fought, painting, been to protests to Parliament, take the kids there … (service provider, metropolitan).*

Language

Many people acknowledged the central role of language in cultural identity formation:

*It’s important for passing on of Aboriginal family values, cultural values, child-rearing practices (government, metropolitan).*

However, including language in programs deserves special support due to the complex and disrupted nature of traditional language use in some areas:

*Lot of families attending MACS [Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services] are not originally from the area. Many have been relocated. This means you can have several language groups. This causes a dilemma for what language do you teach. You can have children from other areas and need to acknowledge that. Our centre has decided to go with the [X] language and not hum and ha anymore. Cause it’s got to be done. At the same time, we have children from other areas and we will acknowledge that and do what we can for them. But go ahead and initiate a program that will get some language into the centre. Takes a while for some communities to reach that point. We want to learn about their culture but we have to learn our own first. Diversity can be 10 different languages in one centre. There are similarities in culture but also differences. There is a map that tells you all the tribal groups. Some families coming are only just identifying as Aboriginal and exploring their new identity (service provider, metropolitan).*

Early learning and development—the learning of mainstream skills and values

Some government agents stressed the importance of early education needs of children, which included the learning of mainstream skills and values:

*Aboriginal people want children to go to school to learn white ways (government, metropolitan).*

There was also clear support for the early education needs of children from the Indigenous participants. As one service provider suggested:

*ABCs, 123, colours, sing songs, share, communicate with others, routine, follows them when they go to preschool. They know how to sit down, get up early in the morning and have a routine (service provider, regional).*

Best-practice models for early education development included programs for transition to school:

*Child care is a stepping stone to build the foundation of our community, a place of learning not babysitting. People think it just starts with school but they need it before school. I had to go and find out about child care (community, remote).*

*They are so well prepared for mainstream school—you notice the difference—they are not scared of who they are because they are brought up like that (community, metropolitan).*

For many, learning incorporates what is needed for children to function or be resilient, both in an Indigenous context and in a mainstream world:

*Build strong children to cope with society—going into a system that makes no allowances for us and gives us no recognition—we need strong communities and children (community, metropolitan).*

It was thus stressed that early education must always be embedded within a cultural context:
To be embedded within culture, the problem for many services is that the role of program development for Indigenous services is integrated with care of the whole community and is thus quite broad. We want our children to have the same educational levels as mainstream children … MACS services and early educators should be recognised as educators (service provider, metropolitan).

This also meant that children’s self-concept and self-esteem is linked to the development of their strength in Indigenous identity. This strength enabled them to cope with the experiences facing them in the outside world and was thus essential for children’s (and ultimately the community’s) ongoing wellbeing:

Shared vision—to empower children, build self-esteem of the children in a loving environment, providing developmental opportunities, make them culturally strong and proud of their heritage—all this provides strong foundations for schooling (service provider, metropolitan).

Health

The incorporation of a health component was seen as contributing to high-quality services for Indigenous children, families and communities. This sometimes involves teaching children and families appropriate and healthy practices:

In the morning with the parents, we wash hands, have breakfast—staff have breakfast too and we give the leftovers to the mothers, children brush their teeth, we check their ears, get them to blow their nose (service provider, very remote).

Providing practical support to facilitate health was a role that many services provided. This sometimes meant services operating as a one-stop shop, or services reaching out to other community services:

It’s a place where you can bring sick kids, feed them here, and make them healthy (community, remote).

The capacity for the childcare [centre] to detect issues and talk to parents about issues that might not be picked up if kids are not in a formal setting. For instance, hospital workers come in. A specialist will come to the centre and see all the kids about their hearing etc. The hospital recognises that they will not see the kids otherwise and so are happy to provide that service at no cost to the centre. They will also come to playgroups … we had a playgroup they were coming—the hospital was coming and there was just a room in front of the house and they would come and do all their tests there and I’m pretty sure after a little while they figured it wasn’t just the children that were coming, other people were coming and using the facility as well (government, metropolitan).

One mum had an appointment for her daughter at the ENT [ear, nose and throat] clinic but could not take her due to work commitments. [X] saw this as very important so told the mum to sign a consent form and she would take her. She spent half the day at the clinic with her. Then she rang mum and told her to come in and see her the next day because she needed to discuss what the medical staff said with her (service provider, regional).

Nutrition

The role of the service in providing nutritional support to families and communities was identified as essential in a number of consultations:

That food is available, access to food, health stuff, nutrition, good stuff is alright, some salad and nuggets etc. … Tucker, food is a very big thing (no sugar for diabetes). Big families can’t buy extra food for one child so we need to provide lunch, snacks and cooked food there at the centre (service provider, metropolitan).

Food and nutrition were closely related to other health agendas, such as basic survival and resource needs, particularly in remote and some regional settings:

The children get three meals a day, their bedding, hats, high-quality meals, good nutrition, so it doesn’t matter so much if they go home and eat chips; they’ve already had enough nutrition during the day at child care (service provider, regional).

Transport

Access to transport, not just to get children to and from child care, but also for families to take advantage of other programs, was cited as necessary:

In one playgroup, six of 21 families have a vehicle but it may not be registered, have a licence or petrol. Transport needs to be included in funding. Need two, one to pick up and drop off children, and one for family support work (service provider, metropolitan).

Access to transport was also cited in the context of supporting the presence of Indigenous Elders to help with cultural activities and cultural programming. Having a bus helps with flexible program delivery which is inclusive and responsive to community needs:

At the end of the day we drop kids home in the bus, we wait till the parents are there or we bring them back to the crèche, or sometimes we move around the community to find their family (service provider, remote).

Play and leisure

Specific children’s services, such as vacation care and outside-school-hours care, often provide play and leisure activities for children:
The vacation care program was very popular as it was seen to be catering for ‘good kids’—most programs only catered for ‘bad kids’ (service provider, regional).

Other play and leisure opportunities are provided, in some cases, in a different manner than the standard children’s services (vacation care, outside-school-hours care, occasional care) models:

The community has applied for a proper sport and recreation officer. We’re hoping this person will be able to provide activities for older kids, take them away on trips. There’s about 60 children attached to the workers at the crèche alone (service provider, metropolitan).

Some leisure needs are also provided by the involvement of community members in the service itself, through their participation in activities with children:

This was the only work available for the women who talked about being bored at home. Talked about how the crèche used to be a community hall. The crèche provides somewhere for the people to come, it keeps families together (community, remote).

Cultural things. There’s a survival instinct when kids are very small, they have to have all of the hunting and fishing learning. The child care should be a place to see the continuance of that sort of learning, of childcare stuff, to allow them to keep moving on (community, remote).

Buildings and general resources

Improved building design and outdoor areas were seen as directly associated with culturally strong programming, of which play is an important component. As one service provider put it, there is often a ‘mismatch between communities, buildings and children’:

Natural surface, not like the ABC where it is fake, artificial grass. Staff said let kids play in dirt, make it like they were at home. There they’re allowed to walk around, run around in the nude but still with set routines. It’s a lot more laid-back in the centre; kids can be themselves and learn things their way. All the children here seem to be happy (community, metropolitan).

Buildings need to be supplied after careful community consultation and the building itself (in contrast to the program elements) is no guarantee of culture:

They need to have a place to spend energy. Aboriginal kids need lots of space, lots of running around; they’re physical. Should also have an Aboriginal flag, should have nice gardens and it should be safe … it should look like a Koori building but doesn’t necessarily have to look that way, it’s more about what happens inside … as long as it is hassle free it could be a horse stable (service provider, metropolitan).

In particular, kitchen facilities were an essential addition to support programs for food and nutrition:

… we need a new building, building could be better, so old, kitchen bigger, make it more inviting, need bigger kitchen, reading areas, area for toileting training, better facilities, good to have a little pool installed, kids love the water in this community, quality of the water, get a water cooler in, child-size sink, locks on the front gate, keep little kids in and keep kids from school out (service provider, remote).

When asked what an ideal Indigenous childcare centre would look like, one person said:

Lots of outdoor space; storage; trees; meeting rooms; health services … parent meeting place; natural surroundings; native plants; sensory gardens; miniature bush setting; covered area for outdoor learning; big area to kick the footy, not just 3.25 square metres per child; we would like to design them ourselves (service provider, metropolitan).

Discussion

From a review of the literature and the data from the consultations, the interrelated components of what constitutes culturally strong childcare programs for Indigenous children, families and communities is clear. To increase Indigenous children’s participation in formal childcare settings—thus to ensure they receive the benefits of high-quality early learning and care—service providers must offer culturally appropriate care that reflects the cultural knowledge and practices of the respective Indigenous communities.

Of the range of issues identified in the consultations, the importance of the inclusion of family and community in the childcare setting was stressed, with many of the participants noting how child care is about more than providing care to children. Rather, it is also about providing support and services that meet family and community needs and preferences, ranging from providing practical support to their inclusion in the types of activities that are provided to children. This includes the importance of the presence of Elders in the children’s daily care and learning experiences (Saggers & Sims, 2005). Because Indigenous children are central to community and family life, the natural care network provided to them is supplied by the whole community and, as such, family and community involvement in the services themselves is considered an essential component of culturally strong programming (Priest et al., 2005; SNAICC, 2004a; Wariki Jarrinkaku ACRS Project Team, 2002).
Another aspect of particular importance as identified in the literature and in the consultations is the formation of the child’s identity and its pivotal role in early childhood development (Fasoli et al., 2004; Priest et al., 2005; SNAICC, 2004b). Strong identity formation occurs when Indigenous children’s early learning and care experiences involve the inclusion of culture and tradition, including language, as well as the inclusion of attention to their spiritual, emotional, social and physical aspects (Fasoli et al., 2004; Priest et al., 2005; Penman, 2006; SNAICC, 2004b). It is, thus, important that childcare settings provide children with a safe and nurturing environment wherein they are free to explore the self in relation to others and the environment, through connection with social and physical elements: people, parents, siblings, family, community and nature (Fasoli et al., 2004; Martin, 1994; Priest et al., 2005). This protecting of the fundamental ‘relatedness’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures has also been noted (Fasoli et al., 2004; Martin, 1994; Priest et al., 2005). It is important to note that the Indigenous people we spoke with identified the significance of children learning mainstream skills and values in preparation for their inclusion in mainstream settings, such as school (SNAICC, 2004a). These skills were said to help strengthen children’s resilience and ease their transition to such settings (SNAICC, 2004a). An important component of formal child care is thus the inclusion of support for the development of literacy and numeracy skills, general school readiness, and formal activities, such as painting, drawing and so forth (SNAICC, 2005). The inclusion of culture into programming does not preclude early childhood education outcomes, it fundamentally supports these.

Conclusion

High-quality early learning and care has the potential to ameliorate the worst effects of Indigenous disadvantage. Indigenous people are clear about what they perceive to be the components of high-quality care, which at its core is best practice, culturally strong programming. The current federal government has a strong focus on developing Indigenous child and family centres. It is crucial that these centres are built on what we know are the strengths of existing programs and with a clear understanding of what Indigenous families identify as approaches that work for them.

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The Early Childhood Australia Doctoral Thesis award was established in 1995, with the aim of encouraging early childhood research and recognising the excellence of early childhood research undertaken by doctoral students.

The Doctoral Thesis Award was presented in 2010 to two recipients and Early Childhood Australia congratulates Margaret Sellers and Stefania Giamminuti as joint recipients of the Doctoral Thesis Award for 2010.

Stefania Giamminuti’s thesis, Pedagogical Documentation in the Reggio Emilia Educational Project: Values, Quality and Community in Early Childhood Settings (2009) investigates the question of how infant-toddler centres and schools become places of culture and how they develop relationships with the surrounding culture.

Margaret Sellers’ thesis Re(con)ceiving children in curriculum: Mapping (a) milieu(s) of becoming (2009) generates ways for thinking differently about children’s complex interrelationships with curriculum by working with the philosophical imaginaries of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.
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Mental health promotion is any action taken to maximise mental health and wellbeing among populations and individuals. It aims to protect, support and sustain the emotional and social wellbeing of the population by promoting the factors that enhance mental health (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). The focus is on creating environments conducive to good mental health and wellbeing for individuals, communities and populations. Previous documents have suggested that the term ‘promotion of emotional and social wellbeing’ may be preferred to the term ‘mental health promotion’, due to the strong historical association between the terms ‘mental health’ and ‘mental illness’ (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000) and, as such, this paper will use the term social and emotional wellbeing.

Increasingly, children throughout the industrialised world, including Australia, attend formal childcare centres (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006) and for many, child care is a critical influence on their early development (second only to immediate family) (Florida State University Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy, 2006). Thus, childcare settings have a significant potential to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing at a population level. Despite this, there are currently
no research studies examining how childcare centres and staff promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing. This information is vital for future population-based programs that aim to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

**Childcare context in Australia**

In Australia, 83 per cent of children aged two to four years access some form of child care (Department of Family and Community Services, 2004). Centre-based or long day care is the most common form of care, and is used by families across the socioeconomic spectrum. While the proportion of children using child care increases with parental income, the differences in patterns of use are minimal (Department of Family and Community Services, 2004).

**Influence of child care on children’s social and emotional wellbeing**

While debate continues about the benefits of non-parental care (particularly long hours in care) (Pluess & Belsky, 2009; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006), there is clear evidence that high-quality centre-based care enhances positive outcomes for children (McCarthy & Morote, 2009; Sammons et al., 2008; Sims, Guilfoyle & Parry, 2006). High-quality care, that which promotes children’s social and emotional wellbeing, is characterised by warm, positive and stimulating staff–child interactions, age-appropriate activities and a safe and healthy environment (National Child Care Accreditation Council, 2005). Child carers need to be knowledgeable, skilled and competent, with access to support services and networks. Further, it is important that they work within a supportive organisation that endorses mental health-promoting policies, has partnerships with community agencies and structures and the organisational resources necessary to address the promotion of children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

**Strategies used to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing at child care**

There has been no systematic investigation of the strategies that childcare centres use to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing. An examination of strategies used by primary school teachers in Australia has been conducted (Nicholson, Oldenburg, McFarland & Dwyer, 1999), and there is now a national primary schools mental health initiative in Australia (Department of Health and Ageing, 2007). Nicholson et al.’s study of teachers’ strategies was based on the health-promoting schools philosophy which recognises that health promotion can occur across multiple levels, including policies, curriculum and links to the community (Department of Health and Family Services, 1996; Nicholson et al., 1999; WHO, 1983; 2007).

When applied to child care, strategies to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing can involve policies, curricula and programs across the whole sector and/or within individual centres, as well as through links with other organisations and groups within the community (Farrell & Travers, 2005). Informal strategies, such as giving support, encouragement and advice to parents, as well as providing consistent and warm caregiving to children, are also recognised as essential elements of a mental health-promoting environment (House, Umberson & Landis, 1988; Seeman, 1996).

**Aims**

This study aimed to explore the strategies used by childcare centre staff to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing, the challenges to doing so, and the views of staff regarding facilitators for promoting such wellbeing. Given existing inequalities in the prevalence of child mental health problems, this study focused on childcare centres located in disadvantaged areas.

**Method**

Ethics approval was obtained from Deakin University (EC98-2007). This was an exploratory descriptive study using qualitative methods, underpinned by ethnographic principles, particularly the generation of ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). Using such thick description, ethnographic studies work to describe culture and another way of life (Spradley, 1979) in order to explain people’s pattern of life by describing the patterns of meaning informing their actions to make them accessible and logical (Liamputton & Ezzy, 2005). In this study, we sought to understand the culture of childcare centres and to describe how this way of life facilitates or impedes children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

The study aimed to sample 20 childcare managers and staff members in order to produce adequate exploratory data from which to yield meaningful themes. While this number is less than is typically required for large-scale ethnographic studies (Morse & Field, 1995), the small scale of the ‘culture’ under investigation made data saturation achievable with fewer participants. When determining sample size, as Morse (2000, p. 3) suggests, ‘the principle is that the broader the scope of the research question, the longer it will take to reach data saturation’.

Participants were recruited from childcare centres within two local government areas (LGAs) in Australia. One LGA was originally selected and, following some difficulty with recruiting any of the commercial childcare
centres, a second neighbouring LGA was also selected. These two LGAs were selected because they were two of the lowest socioeconomic status, according to the Socioeconomic Indicators for Areas (SEIFA) index (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). All for-profit and community-based childcare centres listed in the two LGAs \((n = 42)\) were contacted via letter and then randomly telephoned. Of the 42, only 11 centres agreed. However it must be noted that 25 of the childcare centres that declined were within one profit-making childcare company. Such profit-making companies have previously been shown to decline to participate in research (Rush, 2006). Given this, it was not possible to compare participating and non-participating centres. Researchers spoke with centre directors who either agreed to be interviewed themselves and/or agreed to distribute study information to workers.

Participants were 10 directors and nine workers from 11 long day care centres in two south-eastern Australian LGAs. We requested interviews with the director and one or two carers. Between one and three participants were recruited from each centre and then interviewed. It was intended that analysis of these interviews would identify the scope of participants’ experiences of promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

All but one of the participants were female, with most directors \((n = 8)\) aged 40 years and over (refer to Table 1). Directors typically worked full time \((n = 9)\), had between 10 and 20 years experience \((n = 7)\) in child care, early education or school settings, and held either a trade certificate or diploma \((n = 3)\), graduate or advanced diploma \((n = 4)\) or a university qualification \((n = 3)\). In comparison, almost half of the workers were employed part time \((n = 4)\), most commonly had two to five years experience \((n = 6)\), and generally held a trade certificate or diploma \((n = 7)\). Participants were from both community-based \((n = 6)\) and for-profit centres \((n = 5)\).

**Semi-structured interview**

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted at each participant’s place of work by one of two white female researchers with backgrounds in health promotion and psychology (first and third authors). Before the interview, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire about the centre, their qualifications and experience in childcare settings. An interview guide was used to facilitate exploration of strategies participants felt they used to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children and parents. While a general list of topics was explored, participants’ responses shaped the order and structure of interviews (Esterberg, 2002). Participants were first given a definition of children’s social and emotional wellbeing as ‘the achievement of expected developmental cognitive, social, and emotional milestones and by secure attachments, satisfying social relationships, and effective coping skills’ (Office of the Surgeon General, 1999, p. 123), to ensure consistency in understandings. In order to ensure that child carers focused on mental wellbeing rather than mental illness, the term ‘social and emotional wellbeing’ was used. Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim and participants were reimbursed for their time with a cash payment.

**Data analysis**

A thematic analysis (Morse & Richards, 2002) was conducted to identify the strategies, challenges and facilitators reported by childcare directors and workers using open coding. This process was conducted by two researchers (ED, BD) to enhance credibility of the results. Here, consistent with Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) approach to credibility of quality research, the two researchers compared their postulated findings to each other and back onto the natural context to determine if their preliminary findings held up. Differences were resolved by discussion.
Results

Strategies childcare staff felt they used to promote child social and emotional wellbeing

Participants’ strategies for promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing were grouped across three levels:

- individual child
- centre-wide approaches
- linking with the wider community.

This allowed for consideration of the findings within the context of existing mental health promotion frameworks (Farrell & Travers, 2005). Strategies described in this study were most commonly directed at the individual child; some were centre-wide; and a few were curriculum and activities to link families and children with their communities. As no clear differences in the pattern of responses from directors and workers were identified, data from both were combined, with the few differences described when appropriate.

Strategies aimed at individual children

At an individual child level, participants identified a range of relatively informal strategies. Giving physical affection, providing activities to promote social skills and relationships and treating children equally were frequently mentioned, with the focus predominantly on making children happy, building positive feelings in children or responding to negative feelings and distress. Emotions are a critical component of social and emotional wellbeing and child development; however other important elements, such as physical, social and cognitive development, were rarely mentioned.

Physical affection

Both childcare directors and workers referred to physical contact and giving hugs, suggesting that they strive to provide a caring environment and to ensure that children develop strong relationships with them. Although a caring environment and responsive relationships are imperative to child social and emotional wellbeing, a wide range of strategies is important for promoting social and emotional wellbeing. We found, however, that some staff only used one strategy—physical affection—to help children and support their social and emotional wellbeing:

"I think especially with our age group, we feel they’re at the age where you provide a lot of physical contact, so a lot of hugs and a lot of attention" (worker).

Activities to promote social skills and relationships

Staff indicated that they used various activities that ‘relax children’ or have a social or emotional component, such as singing, reading, role-playing, home corner and dress-ups, to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children. Participants particularly mentioned the importance of encouraging group interaction, sharing and turn-taking skills, and the need for staff to acknowledge children’s achievements and to treat all children equitably.

Centre-wide approaches

Centre-wide approaches are planned and intentional activities focused on social and emotional development. One director explicitly explained how she planned these experiences, based on regular observations of children, in order to ensure they were responsive to the specific needs of individual children, as well as the larger group:

"I do a fortnightly program and it’s based on observations. I offer a program which is tailored to them as well as the whole group, which offers a range of activities and experiences that I think promote and develop their social and emotional wellbeing" (director).

When asked about policies, one participant mentioned enrolment procedures and another described observational checklists for identifying potential mental health difficulties:

"I’m not sure of, like, all the policies because we’ve got quite a few now, but we usually have an introduction time before enrolment that the parents can talk to staff to see if their needs fit into what we can provide here" (worker).

"Well, we pretty much do the observations and we also have a checklist as well" (worker).

Participants did not explicitly identify strategies to promote social and emotional wellbeing for children at risk for mental health problems. The comments suggested that policy was restricted to screening for potential mental health and behavioural problems, or generally supporting the needs of all families.

Links to community as a means of promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of children

Promoting links between settings, such as schools and childcare centres and the wider community, is a key part of mental health promotion frameworks (Farrell & Travers, 2005). It not only includes ensuring families are connected with community services and supports but also other community members. Given the amount of time many children spend in child care, and the role child care plays for supporting parents’ workforce participation, building and maintaining strong links with parents and the wider community would seem a natural extension of childcare centre activities. Participants described several ways that they tried to link families and children to the wider community.
Advising parents
Childcare directors described responding to parental concerns about their children, usually when parents asked for advice, or generically through a newsletter:

So we have had … a parent who came in and said, ‘This is my concern, my child is not listening and doesn’t do this, that or the other’, so I said to her, ‘Well, try this, try it this way, like speak to him in a positive manner because that’s what we do here’ (director).

Linking parents to the community
While some participants indicated that they advertised community events, others reported that they did not do anything to link to the wider community, did not know about community services, or were just starting to consider how they could do so. Overall, those centres that did promote community links tended to use passive strategies, reliant on parents requesting information or having the time and ability to read newsletters or noticeboards within the centre:

We have a lot of brochures and things … If parents you know, are asking about it … The family have to probably ask about it or, or you, if we thought that they would be interested in something well then we’d see if we’ve got brochures or, or something to give to them (worker).

Challenges to promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing
Childcare workers and directors identified five key challenges to promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Difficulties communicating and forming relationships with parents
Childcare staff expressed difficulties with forming relationships with parents and involving them in the activities of their centre. This was felt to be due to time pressures on parents:

The relationships with parents sometimes, parents don’t always have time, and you know, they’re busy, they work, it’s hard (director).

Workers also expressed feelings that parents were not concerned about daily activities within the centre or specifics of their child’s development. Instead, the perception was that parents’ main focus was for their child to be happy and generally believed that their child would grow out of any problems they may be experiencing. Inherent within these comments was a sense of frustration and disempowerment about how to best relate to parents regarding these issues:

In the whole entire time that I’ve been in child care, I’ve only ever had about three or four parents ever come up and they’ve been aware of what we’ve done. So, like, we spend a lot of time doing all of that stuff and the feedback that we get from the parents is just, ‘I don’t care, as long as my kid’s happy’ (worker).

Childcare workers generally reported that parents would not attend events held at the centre, although one director reported a successful parent evening. She also noted that successful events needed to be structured and promoted as fun activities, rather than as educational sessions:

We do a lot of things throughout the year but we just don’t get many parents. And then, so the staff get kind of, ‘Well, why are we doing this because no one comes?’ (worker).

Several workers highlighted difficulties communicating with parents of non-English-speaking backgrounds, and reported this led to worker frustration and limited relationships between staff and parents. Some staff wondered whether parents actually chose not to understand because they did not want to address issues being raised. Participants also stated that children were frequently from many different cultural backgrounds, further challenging workers who often had little understanding of the needs of these children. One worker was unable to identify the major cultural group of children within her centre:

I’d say maybe 80 per cent of them [the parents] don’t speak English, which is very hard. If they [the child] have been sick, if they’ve been crying all day and we think they’re becoming sick, they’ve [the parents] got no idea what you’re saying to them, like, point to your stomach and rub your stomach and they’ve just got no idea … [Interviewer: What sort of cultural backgrounds are we talking about? Is there one in particular that’s—there’s lots of children?] I don’t know what they are (worker).

Difficulties communicating with children
Workers also described challenges communicating with children who were raised in a non-English-speaking household as a barrier to promoting social and emotional wellbeing:

We can find it really hard to communicate with them even, like when they’re outside, you say, ‘Come on, let’s go, it’s time to go inside’, and they’ll just kind of stand there and you’ve got to go over and get their hand and bring them inside, and just like if they get upset, we don’t know if they’re hungry or thirsty or they’re sick or anything (worker).
Inconsistent behaviour management
Childcare workers referred to staff disagreements and inconsistent use of strategies, particularly regarding children's behaviour, as another challenge to promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing:

Sometimes disagreements between other staff or—when you’ve planned an activity that you want to help out a child in a particular area and it’s not really happening all through the week or you’re doing two different things so the kid’s getting a bit confused (worker).

Workers also referred to inconsistencies between parents and staff, particularly different standards and expectations of behaviour and behaviour management:

Parents who, you know, are the old-fashioned, you know, ‘Give them a good wallop if they’re naughty children’, you know, that whole behaviour management thing of, you know, children aren’t naughty, it’s their behaviour that’s not acceptable; that would be the biggest challenge … Just getting them to realise that there are other ways of dealing with children (director).

Difficulties with provision of staff training
The importance of consistent and positive behaviour-management skills, identified above, points to the importance of staff training. Childcare directors also noted that staff asked for more training, but they identified several challenges to providing such opportunities, including competing priorities, such as ensuring continuity of care for children, and costs, both in training fees and staff time. Directors also indicated that workers preferred to attend training with other staff from the same centre, compounding financial costs and challenges to maintaining continuity of care. Some directors saw little value in more training, at least for some staff who they felt wanted to attend every opportunity but appeared to gain little. Ensuring that training opportunities are relevant to child care, valued by staff, and translate into real outcomes and benefits for centres and the children in their care appears to be a critically important issue:

It’s all very well to have training opportunities … but if you said to me, ‘What is the key factor in providing quality children’s services?’ I would say to you, ‘Continuity of care’. Now, if you’ve got staff that are going off every five minutes to be trained to do their job, then where does the continuity of care come into it, all right? (director).

Lack of resources and support for children
A final challenge identified by childcare directors was a lack of resources and support for children with social and emotional problems, including financial resources, as well as support from specialist services and agencies:

Yeah, lacking resources and money I think sometimes … Yeah, just, you know, new things and offering a wider variety, sometimes you just can’t, like you don’t have the money and yeah (director).

Notwithstanding ongoing issues with the adequacy of resources available, supporting staff to value and use the knowledge and skills they already have, as well as the best ways of linking with specialist services, may be an important capacity-building task.

Facilitators to promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing
As well as identifying key challenges, participants identified several facilitators for the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing. These included a cohesive staff team, a consistent philosophical approach, strong leadership, an open door policy and good communication with parents, and peer support from other directors.

Cohesive staff team
Participants described a number of contributing factors to ensuring a cohesive staff team. One director described the importance of a common philosophical approach amongst staff, linking back to earlier comments about the importance of developing centre-wide approaches:

I need supportive staff, staff that can sort of have the same philosophy, I think, that are on the same page … (director).

According to workers, staff dynamics were largely dependent on managers and their ability to support and motivate staff:

I think it does depend on your manager—Mary’s a very positive manager, she likes to include everyone in everything, and she likes to implore the staff to explore different aspects of culturalism and always to be welcoming of different cultures and, you know, tends to take the time to explain things if she needs to and stuff like that (worker).

Open door policy for parents
Participants described multiple benefits from a policy of openness and approachability to parents. This was seen as an important way of giving parents opportunities to seek help from staff, as well as building a sense of belonging and community within the centre. Fostering openness and approachability was also felt to be a key way that childcare centres can support families. This included encouraging parents to participate in activities, along with their children, through both informal invitations as well as organising events to facilitate parents meeting each other. One director particularly described how proud children were when their parents participated in activities in the centre:
And we do invite parents to come in and, at any time, and maybe read to the children or play with them or, a lot of them don’t work full time so they are happy to come and yes, and the children, the particular child, the parents come and they think it’s wonderful, you know, to have the parents come in, very proud (director).

Ability to communicate with parents

Just as difficulties in communicating with parents were seen as a barrier to promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing, good communication skills were seen as an important facilitator. While there are some specific competencies in diploma-level childcare qualifications, directors felt that they needed greater training in communication or basic counselling skills:

The Graduate Diploma of Human Relationships Education that I did, I found that to be really helpful. The training, the Diploma in Children's Services, does not address that part of your work at all, you need to go and do something else (director).

As previously mentioned, bilingual or multilingual skills were also highlighted as being important. Again, supporting staff to access currently available inclusion support services would appear to be an important strategy, along with employing staff from diverse cultural backgrounds to reflect the characteristics of children and families attending the centre:

I think language with the families is a big one. I'm fortunate enough to have a kindergarten assistant who's Vietnamese, so often she will often interpret for me (director).

Peer support for directors

The importance of peer support from other directors as an avenue for sharing problems and mutual support was also highlighted by directors. Finding ways to enhance these networks, both locally and through existing national online forums, in order to develop further mental health-promotion capacity within childcare settings may be useful:

Yeah, so once a month we’ll [directors from different childcare centres] get together and discuss who's having problems. We can email through to each other, get on the phone, and yeah, it's a networking system with, for the directors ... that's been very, very good, invaluable (director).

Opportunities for further promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing

Participants had a number of suggestions for further promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of children, including staff training as mentioned above, communication booklets and extra staff. However, others felt that they were doing everything possible to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing and that there was not more that needed to be done.

Communication booklets

Childcare workers referred to the importance of communication books to enhance communication between workers and parents:

I know other centres do like communication booklets ... Where maybe if we sent that home and, like, the staff will write in it just to see, you know, how their kid went during the day, what they did, how they behaved, their behaviour and things like that (worker).

Extra staff

Childcare workers referred to the importance of additional staff:

Just to have extra staff that could help ... just to have that extra person with them ... would be a great help (worker).

Discussion

This study found that childcare workers and directors report using a range of individual strategies to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children (providing physical affection, offering experiences that promote social skills and relationships). Neurobiological research indicates clearly the necessity for primates to experience nurturing touch, and emphasises the importance of caring relationships in the early years (McCain & Mustard, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shore, 1997). Moreover, warm, consistent and responsive adult–child relationships, supported by continuity of staff, are particularly important to effective service delivery in early childhood settings (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Elliott, 2006; Melhuish, 2003).

Staff also indicated that they used various activities that ‘relax children’ or have a social or emotional component. These strategies are important for social skill development and for building relationships with peers and between children and adults. Moreover, it is also recognised that children's development and learning occurs within the context of relationships and that facilitating and nurturing relationships is imperative (Richter, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Siegel, 1999). Children's long-term success at school is influenced as much by social, emotional and self-regulation skills as by academic skills and knowledge, so a balance between the two is needed in early childhood settings (Boyd et al., 2005; Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Heckman, Stixrud & Urzua, 2006; Raver & Knitzer, 2005).

While some participants also described centre-wide strategies to promote social and emotional wellbeing, such as observing children to inform their program
planning, curriculum or policy-level strategies, these were less frequently mentioned. When giving examples of strategies, childcare directors tended to describe discrete, identifiable activities or behaviours rather than wider, strategic and targeted approaches relating to day-to-day operation of centres. Childcare workers described using caring and helping strategies with children, and giving them physical comfort and affection, as well as the importance of helping young children manage their feelings and develop social skills.

Some childcare workers were aware of the potential role for childcare centres in helping parents manage relationships with their children and as a place for parents to get help and advice. Possibly this reflects the changing social context of parenting. Support and advice, like child care itself, was once traditionally provided by grandparents and extended family networks, but now appears to be increasingly provided by childcare centres. However, this advisory role was generally considered secondary or incidental to other roles played by childcare centres. Exploring ways to build the communication skills of childcare workers and their capacity to interact with parents and children would seem fundamental to any mental health promotion strategy. Our findings support the value of an ‘open door policy’, whereby families can approach carers at any time, as a key strategy to facilitate communication between carers and parents (Bickley, 2008; Knopf & Swick, 2007). While it is unrealistic to expect that childcare workers would acquire high-level counselling skills, such as those held by a social worker or psychologist, more work is needed to identify core communication skills and strategies to build these skills. Creating and strengthening links with professionals who have expertise in communication and counselling may be an important way forward.

Linking families to communities and developing ongoing relationships with parents are aspects of the ‘health-promoting schools’ approach that are under-developed in childcare centres. Communication with parents, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, emerged as a barrier to promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Despite its significance for children who are disadvantaged and at more at risk for mental health problems, it appeared that many centres were struggling to find solutions to this issue. Several workers highlighted difficulties communicating with parents of non-English-speaking backgrounds, and wondered whether parents actually chose not to understand because they did not want to address issues being raised. This clearly suggests an urgent need for staff training and access to bilingual resources, as well as the capacity to communicate and understand, is foundational for problem assessment and support provision. Children from non-English-speaking backgrounds, particularly those who are refugee and humanitarian entrants, are potentially at high risk of poor mental health (Minas & Sawyer, 2002), and this risk is likely to be amplified in settings where carers cannot communicate with the child or the family (Bickley, 2008). Exploring ways of enhancing the cultural competence of childcare centres and their abilities to meet the needs of children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds is an important issue for staff.

Inconsistent behaviour-management practices among parents and childcare workers and between childcare workers were challenging for workers. Inconsistencies in care strategies amongst staff may indicate that training has not challenged them to consider alternative perspectives of child rearing. Differences between parents and staff may be influenced, or at least exacerbated, by communication difficulties and a lack of understanding of alternative value positions. Addressing these issues is an important component of mental health promotion within childcare settings.

Resources, relevance of training to work roles, and the problems associated with attending off-site training were central challenges for staff professional development. However, this study highlights that there is a need for workforce capacity building in the area of mental health promotion, communication with parents and working with culturally diverse communities. Capacity building encompasses actions aimed at strengthening the skills and capabilities of individuals, organisations, systems and communities (Catford, 2007). Capacity-building strategies for mental health promotion have been developed for school settings, including mental health-promoting policies, curricula and systems across the whole sector, building the skills and knowledge of teachers, as well as strengthening links with other organisations and groups within the community (WHO, 2007). Although one aspect of capacity building may be training, for training to be effective and long lasting, it has to be part of a strategy that addresses organisational policies, procedures, resources, standards of practice and supervision (Howarth & Morrison, 1999), consistent with a capacity-building approach.

It would be worth exploring different delivery strategies for training, including the possibility of on-site mentoring, as this has been found to be particularly effective in improving practice (Fiene, 2002) and has been successful for assisting carers supporting children with disabilities. Supporting staff to access currently available inclusion support services would appear to be an important strategy, along with employing staff from diverse cultural backgrounds to reflect the characteristics of children and families attending the centre. Given the importance of peer support for directors and workers, finding ways to enhance these networks, both locally and through existing national online forums, in order to
develop further mental health promotion capacity within childcare settings may be useful.

Our findings could help inform the development of multi-level mental health promotion frameworks for childcare centres. However, they also highlight the problems posed by current undervaluing and inadequate resourcing of the childcare profession (Hill, Pocock & Elliott, 2007). Child–staff ratios are not consistent around the country and there is growing professional concern that ratios are inappropriate in a number of jurisdictions (Rush, 2006), giving rise to the current Council of Australian Governments' focus on reform (Access Economics, 2009). Increasing the recognition given to childcare staff more generally, improving their training requirements, offering better support and guidance regarding childcare quality and curriculum, and improving links with other early childhood services, including education and health, may be important initiatives to improve outcomes for children in child care (Elliott, 2006). We argue that multi-level mental health promotion strategies should be embedded within these activities, and that staff training, remuneration and roles need to be reassessed.

Limitations

Childcare workers and directors were given a definition of social and emotional wellbeing to guide their thinking about strategies. Prompts regarding physical, social, emotional and cognitive development were not given because one of our aims was to explore the spread of strategies they considered were part of promoting wellbeing. However, it is possible that such prompting would have elicited more comprehensive responses. The applicability and transferability of findings from this study to other childcare settings needs to be considered. All the childcare centres in this study were selected from a low socioeconomic area; therefore our results need to be interpreted in this context. Finally, this study did not assess any child outcomes.

Conclusion

Exploration of effective ways of building knowledge and skills regarding mental health across the childcare sector, and the development of policies and systems to support such initiatives, are needed to strengthen the capacity of child care to promote children's mental health. Determining what is a reasonable role to expect of childcare staff, how training and remuneration should reflect this role, and what the contribution of other professionals and service providers should be, are key elements of such deliberations.

References


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The Effects of the Art Education Program on Drawing Skills of Six-Year-Old Gifted Children in the High Socio-Economic Status in Turkey

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AN ART EDUCATION PROGRAM WAS designed to develop the drawing skills of gifted children. In this study, the program was implemented with six-year-old gifted children receiving regular pre-elementary school education to investigate its impact. The main question to be answered was: Does the Art Education Program affect the drawing skills of six-year-old gifted children?

The study included 26 girls and 26 boys from private preschools in Ankara, Turkey. Among these children, 26 were chosen as the experimental group and 26 were chosen as the control group. Both groups undertook the Silver Drawing Test before and after the program so any changes could be measured. The experimental group, after the pre-test, participated in an Art Education Program consisting of 18 sessions. There was a significant improvement in the drawing skills of the experimental group when compared to the control group ($p < 0.001$). However, the relationship between the pre-test, final test scores and years of pre-elementary education was not statistically significant at five per cent significance level.

Introduction

Giftedness is a distinctive and atypical pattern of development, in which children’s cognitive abilities develop faster than expected for their age. Asynchronous development creates disparities between attained levels of intellectual, physical, social, emotional and skill development (Morelock & Morrison, 1999). In general, gifted children tend to learn rapidly, enjoy abstract and complex ideas, and have a facility for extracting and constructing meaning from experience. Nevertheless, each gifted child is unique in his or her profile of talent potential across specific domains of performance (for example, maths, music, art, language etc.) (Morelock, 1996; Morelock & Morrison, 1996; Porter, 2005). For this reason, gifted children need appropriate programs designed especially to suit their development (Porter, 2005).

The early years of development are the fastest stage of growth, when children progress at rates that will not be observed in later years (Kefi, 2002; Porter, 1999). Participation of gifted children in programs that match their needs and aptitude will result in them using their potential abilities to the utmost level (Gur, 2006; Porter, 1999).

Gifted children’s education is a rather recent topic of study in Turkey (Gokdere, 2004). Although special high-level classes were launched in the 1960s, unfair practices were encountered in the identification of gifted children, which led to the program being abandoned. In the 1980s, similar attempts were made and several new projects were developed. However, the most important development in the education of gifted children has been the opening of talent development centres which were established under the name ‘Science and Art Centers’ (SACs) in five cities by 1993 (Gokdere, 2004).

Today, there are 52 SACs in Turkey affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). The education and identification of gifted children is undertaken by these centres. Students are nominated by teachers with the help of an observation form, examined individually, and those identified as gifted continue their education with regular children but, at the same time, receive extra education at a SAC (MoNE, 2007). However, children educated in SACs are seven years and older, and no serious program exists in the country for gifted children who are younger than seven years (Davasligil, 2004).

There is a need to develop a basic program for all gifted children, regardless of their area of giftedness (Howley,
Howley & Pendarvis, 1986; Rogers, 2002). Each gifted child demonstrates giftedness in a different area so, at the beginning, a basic program should be implemented, regardless of the area of giftedness (Gur, 2006; Howley et al., 1986). Since art encompasses a wide array of child development (Heath & Wolf, 2005; Rogers, 2002), it is the most appropriate starting point for the analysis of gifted children who are not exposed to a special education program that matches their needs (Gur, 2006).

Research indicates that art programs support gifted children's cognitive and social skills, as well as their creativity and academic success (Fiske, 1999; Heath & Wolf, 2005; Seeley, 1994; Willet, 1992). This makes art an undeniably powerful resource for gifted children (Rogers, 2002; Smutny, 2002). Participation in art activities provides children with ample opportunities to learn how to elaborate on their ideas, interests and meaningful life experiences (Korn, 2002). Doing art requires children to think about their ideas, feelings or experiences with the world, to find symbols to express them, and to share them with others (Bae, 2004). Children's ability to create visual images that convey their ideas and experiences, as well as to appreciate artwork, is enhanced by education (Thompson, 1995).

A survey of the literature in Turkish about the education of gifted children showed that very few studies had been conducted. In fact, there were only a handful of programs developed especially for gifted children (Davasligil, 2004). These children generally attend programs developed for children progressing at the normal rate; however, the programs are insufficient in meeting gifted children's needs (Davasligil, 2004). Therefore, the Art Education Program designed for this study holds the significance of being one of the few programs developed for six-year-old gifted children in Turkey.

The Art Education Program

The Art Education Program prepared for six-year-old gifted children of higher socioeconomic status is thought to hold the attention of gifted children and consists of diverse activities and materials. The program mainly aims to:

- contribute to the drawing skills of children
- encourage them to express their perceptions by drawing
- support their problem-solving skills
- improve their skills in expressing the problems they have solved via drawing.

The program consists of 18 sessions. The first seven sessions are based on the sessions in the Silver Art Program (Silver, 2001). These sessions aim to develop the skills measured with the Silver Drawing Test (SDT), which was administered as a pre- and post-test. The remaining 11 sessions were designed by the researchers to address the drawing and educational needs of gifted children and develop their drawing from prediction, observation and imagination skills, tested via the SDT. The sessions in the art program are organised fundamentally from basic to complex and from concrete to abstract. During the preparation of the Art Education Program, specialists who had previous experience with art education and gifted children were consulted and the criteria they suggested were incorporated into the program.

The activities in the program include drawing from imagination, paintings, painting from imagination, predictive drawing and painting, modelling, drawing from observation and imagination, development of art compositions, support for creativity, story alignment, and working with waste material, collage and clay. These were planned as open-ended activities.

During the implementation of the program, various original thoughts and ideas were supported. Children were encouraged to establish links between ideas and evaluate the topic from multiple perspectives. As expected from education programs for gifted children, the program involved few repetitions and proceeded at a faster pace than normal. Higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation and problem solving, were emphasised.

In order to develop children's drawing from observation skills, they were shown how to really see, examine and portray what they observed. On the other hand, children's predictive drawing skills were supported by activities in which they produced illustrations, based on predictions of how a spectacle could change in a different situation. Moreover, these predictive drawing activities developed children's problem-solving abilities. In the activities conducted to develop children's drawing from imagination skills, they were asked to produce original materials using their imagination and creativity, and create various combinations and compositions with the materials they chose from the variety presented to them.

The program ensured that children's products were original and reflected each child's own imagination and creativity. The education process was at least as important as the products. To enable children to closely observe their own work, as well as those of their friends, and encourage them to make a synthesis of their own ideas with other people's, they were given an opportunity to display their ideas at the end of the activity.

In Turkey, where special schools or special after-school programs for gifted young children do not exist, these children are educated in regular preschools, together with other children. As literacy skills are only taught in primary first grade (to seven-year-olds), six-year-old children do not know how to read and write. Therefore, all gifted six-year-olds cannot be expected to read and write fluently, nor to the same extent.
Thus, the application of a drawing test as a pre- and post-test was agreed as a practical solution. Since these are quite young children, the test needed to be user friendly and the instructions needed to be easily understood. After an evaluation of existing tests, the SDT was identified as ideal. It is also widely known that gifted young children do not maintain their attention when faced with non-challenging tasks (Porter, 2005). Therefore, the test also needed to be one that would not bore children. Before using the SDT, a pilot study with 10 children was conducted to ensure the usability of the test with children. The SDT was implemented smoothly and perceived as an interesting and enjoyable activity by the children in the pilot study. As well, those in the sample during the validity and reliability studies of the test, and those in the sample during the use of the test as a pre- and post-test in the Art Education Program, similarly enjoyed the activity.

Method

Previous studies indicated that gifted children may come from low, middle or high socioeconomic levels (Winner, 1996). Nevertheless, it is stressed that in Turkey it is easier to identify gifted children of high socioeconomic status because they generally attend better educational programs and encounter intelligence test questions more frequently than other children do in their educational life (Ataman, 1982; Fowler, 1995; Porter, 1999; Winner, 1996). The participants in this study were six-year-old gifted children from a high socioeconomic level. This selection was preferred, considering the fact that Turkish pre-elementary children are not yet literate, and their giftedness is difficult to identify when compared with other age groups. This study was conducted in Ankara, in independent, private preschools and preschools of private high schools which gave permission.

Subjects

A total of 52 children, 26 girls and 26 boys, identified with an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 130 or higher from the Goodenough-Harris Adam Drawing Test and Primary Mental Abilities Test (age group: 5–7) (MoNE, 1994), were included in the study. The children were categorised into two groups—experimental and control. In each group, there were 13 boys and 13 girls; a total of 26 children per group.

Instruments

Primary Mental Abilities Test 5-7

Primary Mental Abilities Test 5–7 is the group intelligence test most frequently applied to five- to seven-year-old children in Turkey (MoNE, 1994). This test was developed by Thurstone (1938) and has been used in Turkey since 1953. Having been revised in 1994, normative studies have been conducted for Turkish samples (MoNE, 1994).

Goodenough-Harris Draw a Man Test

Used as a group intelligence test in this study, the Goodenough-Harris Test is widely used in the country (Ozguven, 1996). In order to ensure its reliability, a Pearson correlation analysis (Ozguven, 1999) was performed between this test and two individual intelligence tests; namely, the Stanford-Binet and Wechsler Intelligence Tests (Ozguven, 1999). Correlation coefficients ranging between 0.40 and 0.60 were obtained (Ozguven, 1999). Another reliability study conducted at the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department at Hacettepe University found a correlation of 0.70 between the scores of Goodenough-Harris and Stanford-Binet Tests (Ozguven, 1996). This test requires the child to draw a complete man. Following this, the child is given another piece of paper and asked to draw a woman (Ozguven, 1996). The test measures the sensitivity of the child’s observations, their ability to see the whole and their concept development level. Scoring depends on criteria such as the presence of the crucial components that should appear in the picture, details of clothing and the proportion of the parts to the whole (Ozguven, 1996). There is a maximum score of 73 points possible in the male scale and 71 in the female scale. Raw scores may be converted into a single standard score, an IQ with a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15 (Ozguven, 1999).

Silver Drawing Test

The SDT was developed by Rawley Silver (1983) and includes three subtests: drawing from imagination, predictive drawing and drawing from observation. Each subtest was designed to assess one of the three concepts (Silver, 2002) believed to be fundamental in mathematics and reading (referring to Piaget, 1970)—the concepts of group, sequential order and space. The test has been translated into Turkish and its validity and reliability has been measured (Gur, 2006). As a result of the validity and reliability study conducted on a 150-person sample, the correlation between the test and Goodenough-Harris was found to be significant ($r = 0.43, p < 0.001$) and test–retest reliability was 0.90 ($\text{Alfa} = 0.67$). Validity and reliability studies concluded that the Turkish copy of SDT is concordant with the original copy ($\text{Root Mean Square Error of Approximation} = 0.07, \text{Goodness of Fit Index} = 0.94, \text{Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index} = 0.89$) (Gur, 2006). In this study, the SDT was used to evaluate the children’s drawing abilities.
**Procedure**

Children with a score of 110 and above from the Goodenough-Harris Draw a Man Test underwent the Primary Mental Abilities Test 5–7. The children who obtained a score of 130 or higher on the Primary Mental Abilities Test 5–7 were included in the study sample. The children were randomly assigned to the experimental or control group. The SDT pre-test was applied to both groups. Then, the Art Education Program was applied to the experimental group three times a week in 30-minute sessions to groups of eight to nine children. Following the six-week program, both groups were administered the SDT as a post-test.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, in order to examine the effect of the Art Education Program on the experimental group, two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Buyukozturk, 2003) with repeated measures on a single factor was conducted to test the effects of the experiment. The relationship between the drawing skills of the students who participated in the Art Education Program and the number of years in early childhood education was tested with the Kruskal Wallis H-test (Buyukozturk, 2003), which is used to compare more than two populations in a randomised design, and requires the dependent variable to be in the smallest interval scale (Buyukozturk, 2003). This test was preferred, as the duration of preschool education was divided into three groups as one–two years, three years and four years, and the analysis was limited to the experimental group.

**Results and discussion**

In order to evaluate the impact of the Art Education Program on six-year-old gifted children’s drawing skills, both groups’ pre- and post-SDT scores were evaluated. The effects of the number of years of preschool education on the students’ drawing skills were also examined via pre- and post-SDT scores from the experimental group.

As presented in Table 1, the average SDT scores of the Art Education Program participants increased after the experiment. A significant increase was observed in their drawing abilities in comparison to the children in the control group, as can be seen from Table 2 ($p < 0.001$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre-test Mean</th>
<th>Pre-test sd</th>
<th>Post-test Mean</th>
<th>Post-test sd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental ($n=26$)</td>
<td>19.50</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>30.92</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control ($n=26$)</td>
<td>20.81</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>20.65</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation results of the Silver Drawing Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variance</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1551,414</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42,52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group (Individual / Group)</td>
<td>522,010</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>522,010</td>
<td>26,38</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>989,404</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>19,788</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>1993,499</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement (pre-test &amp; post-test)</td>
<td>825,471</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>825,471</td>
<td>139,03</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group* Measurement</td>
<td>871,163</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>871,163</td>
<td>146,72</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>296,865</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5,937</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3504,913</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results of the pre- and post- Silver Drawing Test Scores

The results of the study indicate that the impact of the Art Education Program on the development of the drawing abilities of six-year-old gifted children is significant. This research enriches and supports the literature by verifying that art programs developed for these gifted children support their developments in artistic areas, such as drawing (Geffen, 1991; Gilbert & Zimmerman, 1998; Li-Ming, 2007), and also supports the literature by verifying that art education programs promote children’s drawing abilities (Barnes, 2002; Brookes, 1996; Morelock & Morrison, 1999). The improvement in the children’s drawing skills in this study is believed to be a positive consequence of the Art Education Program.

The Art Education Program was developed with the aim of improving predictive drawing, drawing from observation, and drawing from imagination skills. It seemed to have a significant positive impact on all of these skills. To begin with, there was a significant increase in the *predictive* drawing skills (referring to Piaget’s problem-solving tasks, 1970) of the children who had attended the Art Education Program ($F_{(1–50)} = 21.85$, $p < 0.001$). It is thought that a favourable change may result from activities that:

- support the development of predictive drawing skills
- are in line with children’s developmental levels
- provide stimulation
- ensure children’s active participation
Similarly, Gelman (1969) provided education to pre-elementary children in solving Piagetian tasks, such as conservation, water level and depth tasks, and observed these children to pass from pre-operational level to concrete operational thought. In an earlier study, Silver and Lavin (1977) launched an art education program for 11 children, seven to 11 years of age, with learning difficulties. The program offered one-hour sessions weekly for 11 weeks. At the end of the program, the children's acquisition of spatial relationships, sequential and categorial skills were considered to be significant based on their pre-test scores. Kail (2004) also states that developmentally appropriate education promotes pre-operational level children to progress to the concrete operational thought stage. Developmentally appropriate education is also known to support the development of children's predictive drawing skills (Aral & Kandir, 2000). Painting from light to dark tones, painting from imagination, predictive drawing and painting, and modelling clay activities in Silver's program all aim to improve predictive drawing skills (Silver, 2001). Predictive drawing, drawing from observation, sequence-a-story tasks, and working with waste material activities in the program were also developed to promote predictive drawing skills. These activities aimed to promote the development of problem-solving abilities and expression with drawing by providing opportunities to discover, via experience with various mediums. The activities in this program developed the children's predictive drawing skills; hence, it is believed that the program contributed to the significant advantages acquired by the experimental group.

Second, the effects of the Art Education Program on the development of drawing from observation were also examined. A significant increase was observed in the experimental group's drawing from observation skills when compared to the control group ($F(1–50) = 70.90$, $p < 0.001$). Previous studies also report that an art education program develops drawing from observation skills (Rogers, 2002). For instance, Callahan (1992) concluded that education aiming at developing five- to six-year-old children's perceptual skills, based on observation of models, does develop their drawing skills. Gander and Gardiner (1995) claim that, when children are required to make detailed observations and produce portraits, they are provided with opportunities to develop their observational attitudes and skills. In a similar study, Foderaro (1989) administered the Monart Drawing Program to an experimental group of 11 out of 21 primary school children with reading and visual perception difficulties. The program developed for this study aimed to develop the children's drawing from observation skills. Following 16 lessons in the education program, statistically significant development was identified in 82% of the experimental group's visual perception skills. On the other hand, regression in post-test scores was observed in 60% of the control group, and minimal development in 40%. It can thus be assumed that art education that stresses the development of visual perception improves children's visual perception skills, whether they are at a pre-elementary level or primary school level. According to Abaci (2003), art education can help pre-elementary children attain visual maturity, identify the differences and similarities between objects, realise proportional relationships, and make judgements. Moreover, art education supports the development of children's concentration skills. Following the application of drawing from observation activities, children begin to realise the relationships between objects and shapes, and are more skilled in portraying the attributes of objects (Cooke, Griffin & Cox, 1998). Atan (2004) claims that visual–spatial art applications make children see differences and similarities, develop visual–spatial memory and reach visual–spatial maturity. As illustrated in the literature, with the support of enriched education programs aiming to develop children's drawing skills, children's drawing from observation skills is developed. This development is believed to be a result of the Art Education Program.

Third, the analysis of children's drawing from imagination test results indicated a significant increase in the drawing from imagination skills of the children who had been exposed to the Art Education Program ($F(1–50) = 50.53$, $p < 0.001$). Anderson and Yates (1999) administered a six-week educational artistic clay program to 28 six- and seven-year-old children. Another 28 children, the control group, were also included in the study. While the experimental group was observed to have acquired significant advantages in their creative–imaginative abilities, decorative skills and aesthetic perceptions, no significant difference was seen in the control group. Stewart (1990) reported that primary school children working with branch specialists in ceramics classes showed significant differences between their beginning pieces of work and final ones, and emphasised the significant improvements these children demonstrated. Öncü and Darica (2004) emphasise in their study that encouraging children to draw various subjects and discussing these drawings promotes the development of drawing skills. Moreover, Öncü and Darica (2004) stress that children should be supported to draw the stories they have imagined. A review of the studies in the literature reflects that art education and drawing activities contribute positively to the development of drawing from imagination skills. The results of the present study also indicate the significant progress of drawing from imagination skills of children attending the Art Education Program. This was attributed to the fact that the program was at the children's developmental level, the activities and materials attracted the children's attention, and the...
program was not perceived as boring and therefore did not lead to apathy. Additionally, the program did not include consecutive activities aiming to achieve one particular aim. For instance, activities to develop predictive drawing skills were not followed by imagination drawing skills. Activities were mixed and balanced throughout the program, and activities with similar aims were intended to reinforce each other after a certain time.

As seen in Table 3, there was no significant relationship between the experimental group's pre- and post-test scores, and their years of pre-elementary education ($p > 0.05$). An insignificant relationship was identified between SDT subtest scores and the number of years of pre-elementary education ($p > 0.05$). An insignificant relationship was identified between SDT subtest scores and the number of years of pre-elementary education ($p > 0.05$).

**Table 3. Kruskal Wallis Test Results of Pre-SDT and Post-SDT Scores of Children Attending the Art Education Program and the Number of Years of Pre-Elementary Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of pre-school education period</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Rank Average</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>$x^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2 Years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-SDT Scores of Children Attending the Art Education Program</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Rank Average</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>$x^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2 Years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$n =$ number of children, $sd =$ standard deviation, $x^2 =$ chi-square, $p =$ significance level

These results indicate that the art education offered to six-year-old gifted children may be insufficient. That the number of years of pre-elementary education had no significance before or after the application of the Art Education Program suggests that the children did not acquire significant advantages from art education within their pre-elementary education. In Ankara, there are no educational institutions that offer early childhood education to gifted children or any school that enriches its program or adapts it for gifted children. As a result, gifted children attend the programs which have been developed for children progressing at the normal rate. The present study demonstrates that these regular programs are not sufficient in developing gifted children's drawing skills, and that there is a need for art education programs developed particularly for them. Art education activities in Turkey, particularly in the pre-elementary stage, are insufficient for non-gifted children, let alone gifted ones (Gur, 2006).

Art activities do exist in early childhood education programs; however, these are run as ordinary free-time activities and not as art education activities developed in line with pre-specified objectives (Aykut, 2004; Gur, 2006). Most teachers simply present the children with the products of a previous activity, and give them the same materials and instructions to emulate them (Kefi, 2002). Contrary to what is ideal, children are given a passive role through such activities (Kefi, 2002). Acer and İhan (2004) studied the relationship between the developmental level and drawings of 100 five- and six-year-old children from five private preschools in Ankara and found that the pictures drawn by 73.4% of the five-year-olds and 25% of the six-year-olds were below their developmental level. A general examination of the results reveals that 54% of the children were below their expected development. Only 3.5% of the five-year-olds and 7.5% of the six-year-olds produced pictures above their developmental level. Since the programs administered in private schools are richer than those in public schools, the pictures produced by the children in these schools are expected to be at a higher level. These results suggest that the present education given to develop drawing skills is not sufficient. Yildiz (2004) mentions the importance of offering art education in-service programs to early education teachers and the need for the enrichment of periodicals that include applied art educational activities. Findings from the literature reveal that there is not enough focus on pre-elementary art education in Turkey and that children's drawing skills are below the expected level. While gifted children actually need programs specifically developed for them, they have to be content with art activities which are not even sufficient for non-gifted children, and thus fail to attain significant benefits from pre-elementary art education.

**Conclusion**

We conclude that it would be beneficial to identify gifted children at a young age and expose them to a program that answers their needs. Moreover, it is believed that art education programs should be developed for these children and attendance should be strongly encouraged. Furthermore, enriched art education programs may be developed and applied in both gifted and non-gifted classrooms. It is thought that such programs will make important contributions to both groups of children's social, emotional and cognitive development. As can be seen from the findings, the duration of pre-elementary education is not important, as long as gifted children do not receive significant benefits. Therefore, education programs should be created for gifted preschoolers in Turkey, and the awareness of families, schools and teachers should be raised. For a country like Turkey, where studies into gifted children's education are
lagging behind and no pre-elementary programs exist for the gifted, the field of art may be a good start. Tests to identify children’s areas of giftedness should be brought to the country, validity and reliability studies should be conducted, and children’s areas of giftedness should be identified and supported. It is believed that every study conducted and every program developed for pre-elementary gifted education in Turkey will make a significant contribution to the field.

On the other hand, we emphasise the importance of a diversity of materials, particularly in art programs for these children. It is believed that, as children explore various tools and materials, they will grow and create products that will satisfy them more. These programs need to grab the attention of children so that their participation and development is ensured. The diversity of materials in this study is believed to be a factor that made this program interesting for children. Based on previous experiences, we emphasise that, if a diversity of materials does not exist in the program, gifted children may soon become bored, lose interest and refuse to participate.

References


Constructing leadership in child care:
Epistemological beliefs and transformational leadership

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Di Nailon
Emma Tickle
Queensland University of Technology

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC) in Australia are currently a focus of social and economic policy. However, early childhood leadership in Australia is yet to develop a clear identity that will enable the field to develop to its full potential. In this paper we investigate a unique theoretical framework for constructing leadership identity, based on transformational leadership and epistemological beliefs. Using semi-structured interviews, 15 childcare directors from a large metropolitan area in Australia were asked to describe their beliefs about knowing in the context of their leadership practices. The findings showed that leaders \( n = 5 \) who espoused predominantly evaluativist beliefs about knowing were more likely to describe transformational leadership behaviours in the context of childcare leadership. A number of leaders held mixed beliefs \( n = 9 \) about knowing and described their leadership practice in ways that reflected both transactional and transformational leadership styles. Finally, one leader described predominantly objectivist epistemological beliefs and transactional beliefs about leadership. These preliminary findings show that there seems to be a relationship between core epistemological beliefs and beliefs about leadership practices and offers a new way to characterise leadership in ECEC in Australia.

Background

The early years are recognised as an important time in determining children’s later learning and development. High-quality child care is a key social policy issue in Australia (OECD, 2001; Press & Hayes, 2000). In recent times, both state and federal governments in Australia have provided considerable funding for early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. However, the early childhood field in Australia is currently experiencing a lack of cohesion, in part due to competing philosophical perspectives and discourses. These competing perspectives include viewing ECEC as: a mother substitute; preparation for formal education; and ‘social remediation’ (Woodrow & Busch, 2008, p. 84). Cohesion has also been threatened by the increasing marketisation of child care in Australia, specifically the push to deregulate child care. For example, the for-profit sector is currently lobbying to remove the requirement to have trained teachers in child care (Woodrow & Busch, 2008), which is at odds with research into high-quality child care. What is clear is that in a profession that is battered by competing ideologies and a lack of policy cohesion, early childhood leadership in Australia is yet to emerge with its own identity. According to Sergiovanni (1994, in Woodrow & Busch, 2008) we need to construct a leadership identity which is unique to ECEC, rather than simply using ideas from other disciplines. In this paper we investigate a unique theoretical framework for constructing leadership identity in Australian ECEC, based on transformational leadership and epistemological beliefs (Tickle, Brownlee & Nailon, 2005).

Transformational leadership

A growing body of organisational leadership research over the last three decades clearly indicates the significance of leadership to both staff and organisational outcomes. Effective leadership has been shown to have an impact on a range of variables within organisations, including improvements in staff satisfaction (Hatter & Bass, 1988; Koh, Steers & Terborg, 1995) and engagement with the organisation (Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996; Koh et al., 1995). In school organisations, effective leadership is also related to improved teacher motivation (Barnett & McCormick, 2003) and commitment to organisational change (Yu, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2002). Lower and Cassidy (2007) highlight the relationships between childcare program administration, organisational climate and the global quality of care provided in the setting.
The notion of effective leadership can be investigated using a body of literature related to transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders are able to engage staff in such a way that enables staff to perform at a level beyond expectations (Krishnan, 2001). There are four dimensions related to transformational leadership (Bass, 1985):

- **Idealised influence** relates to the promotion of trust and respect in staff members. Leaders become role models but also enable the group to develop a sense of mission (Humphreys & Einstein, 2003).
- **Inspirational motivation** relates to promotion of staff engagement with, and commitment to, the organisation (Kelloway & Barling, 2000). This involves intrinsic motivational dimensions.
- **Intellectual stimulation** is a dimension of transformational leadership that focuses on how leaders encourage staff to think and learn in creative and stimulating ways (Kelloway & Barling, 2000; Pounder, 2003). Staff are more likely to engage in innovative approaches because leaders engender a sense of trust and respect (Coad & Berry, 1998), scaffold staff learning experiences, and provide the appropriate resources and professional development (Sarros & Santora, 2001).
- **Individualised consideration** means that transformational leaders engage with staff members on an individual basis. They take steps to ensure that each staff member is treated as an important member of the workplace community and that their individual needs are considered (Coad & Berry, 1998; Sarros & Santora, 2001). Such leaders, through individual consideration, provide an environment conducive to ‘appropriate workplace behaviour’ (Sarros & Santora, 2001, p. 385).

Specifically, the transformational leadership dimensions of **intellectual stimulation** and **individualised consideration** (Bass, 1985) reflect a focus on staff learning through facilitation and mentoring, although idealised influence (trust and respect) and inspirational motivation are also critical aspects that support effective learning. Baxter Magolda (1996) refers to the importance of respect and trust in her description of effective learning through connected teaching. These behaviours suggest a belief that knowledge can be constructed by the learner and gained through reasoning.

In contrast, transactional leadership is described as a performance-based system where staff are extrinsically motivated to achieve in the organisation (Bass & Avolio, 1990). In this leadership approach, leaders endeavour to meet staff needs by initiating goals, defining roles and providing rewards so that staff will perform to expectations (Gardner & Stough, 2002). Transactional leadership can be further differentiated through the dimensions of **management by exception** and contingent reward. In **management by exception**, leaders use a laissez-faire approach to management and fail to initiate change (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Leadership utilising **contingent reward** uses rewards such as praise, pay increases, bonuses and promotion (Coad & Berry, 1998). While these strategies are useful in certain situations, such leadership behaviours do not promote active learning because staff are not required to actively question, problem solve or construct their own knowledge and thus motivation remains extrinsic. These leaders do not reflect on the process of learning, although it is implied through the use of external motivators that knowledge may be transmitted through an external authority.

Recently, transformational leadership research has focused on what variables might predispose a leader to engage in transformational leadership behaviours and how such behaviours can be identified and nurtured (Barling, Slater & Kelloway, 2000; Kelloway & Barling, 2000; Sivananthan & Fekken, 2002). One such variable is transformational leaders’ beliefs (Krishnan, 2001) and, in particular, their core beliefs (Russell, 2001). Krishnan (2001) proposes that understanding the relationship between core beliefs and transformational leadership behaviours may inform the identification and nurturing of transformational leaders.

### What are epistemological beliefs?

The study of epistemological beliefs as a set of core beliefs about knowing may provide a way to understand transformational leadership. Epistemological beliefs reflect an individual’s views on what knowledge is, how it is gained, and the limits and criteria for determining knowledge (Perry, 1981). Such beliefs are described as ‘core’ because they are considered to act as filters for all other knowledge and beliefs (Posner, Strike, Hewson & Gertzog, 1982). Perry’s seminal work (1981) found that Harvard liberal arts students developed increasingly sophisticated ways of knowing, from:

- beliefs that knowledge was simple and certain and could be transmitted by authorities (dualism or objectivism), to
- beliefs that personal opinions count as knowledge, without the need to critique or support with evidence (multiplicity or subjectivism), and finally to
- beliefs that knowledge is personally constructed, evolving and evidenced-based (relativism or evaluativism).

The use of the term ‘sophisticated’ is common in the personal epistemology literature. It refers to beliefs in knowledge and knowing that go beyond a simple view of knowledge as absolute and transferable to one that recognises the complexity of knowledge and knowing by attending to and weighing up multiple perspectives. This developmental scheme was supported by researchers including Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), Kitchener and King (1981) and Baxter Magolda (1994).
Later work by Schommer (1994), however, challenged this stage-like view of development, proposing instead a multidimensional framework where various epistemological beliefs may develop at varying rates. While Schommer’s work has contributed much to our understanding of epistemological beliefs from a multidimensional perspective, criticisms exist with regard to the validity of her measure and the use of certain constructs within this measure which do not directly reflect core epistemological beliefs.

A range of research supports links between evaluativist epistemological beliefs and constructivist teaching practice (Berthelsen, Brownlee & Boulton-Lewis, 2002; Brownlee, 2000). Chan and Elliot (2000), Arredondo and Rucinski (1996) and Brownlee (2000; 2001) found that beliefs that view knowledge as personally constructed and evidenced-based were related to higher levels of metacognition and transformative teaching practices (Brownlee, 2001). Such practices promoted the construction of knowledge though personal links to prior knowledge and intrinsic motivation. Conversely, teachers with less sophisticated beliefs, whereby knowledge is considered to be simple and certain and able to be transmitted by experts, were more likely to engage in transmissive teaching practices (Brownlee, 2000). Transmissive teaching involves pedagogy that is adult-directed, less focused on the active construction of meaning, and involves the use of extrinsic motivation to engage learners.

What role do epistemological beliefs play in how leaders support learning?

In the same way a teacher with more sophisticated epistemological beliefs is likely to behave differently to a teacher with less sophisticated epistemological beliefs, the behaviour of leaders who support learning in organisations may vary depending on the maturity of their epistemological beliefs. Researchers studying leadership and management in learning organisations contend that, for a learning culture to be created, the behaviour of leaders must support a range of learning across individuals and teams (Cullen, 1999). The learning organisation, according to Ellinger and Bostrom (2002), requires leadership behaviours that are focused on teaching and facilitation and thus how leaders behave as supporters of learning can be related to how teachers support learning.

Little research has been conducted explicitly linking leadership styles to an individual’s epistemological beliefs. However, as discussed earlier, the study of epistemological beliefs in the work of teachers has shown a correlation between epistemological beliefs and the teaching methods used in the classroom (Brownlee, 2001). Objectivist epistemological beliefs are often related to transmissive approaches to teaching, where knowledge is considered absolute and learned from the direction of a superior. Evaluativist epistemological beliefs have been ‘linked to both transformative or constructivist approaches to teaching and to more innovative, democratic and empathetic teaching behaviours’ (Tickle et al., 2005, p. 9).

The differences in approaches to teaching—that is, transmissive versus transformative—appear to be similar to those found between transactional and transformational leadership behaviours. With regard to transformational leadership, the dimensions of intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration reflect a strong focus on a worker’s learning in the workplace. The transformational leader is one who promotes a problem-solving approach to issues in the workplace. ‘These behaviours suggest a belief that knowledge can be constructed by the learner and gained through reasoning’ (Tickle et al., 2005, p. 9).

On the other hand, transactional leaders are focused on clearly identifying workers’ roles and developing work structures. Tickle et al. (2005) argue that transactional leaders are less likely to encourage knowledge construction in the workplace because their leadership behaviours are more focused on either a laissez-faire or a behaviouristic approach to management. In both of these dimensions of transactional leadership, the leader is less concerned about active learning and more focused on rewards in the workplace (Coad & Berry, 1998). Tickle et al. (2005, p. 9) reasoned that ‘the transactional leader’s behaviour demonstrates a belief that knowledge is simple, clear and specific and resides in authority, and that the leader holds relatively naive epistemological beliefs’.

We argue that transformational leaders are those leaders who demonstrate more sophisticated epistemological beliefs, while transactional leaders reflect a focus on more naive epistemological beliefs. ‘Thus, in the same way a teacher with mature epistemological beliefs will behave differently to a teacher with less mature epistemological beliefs, the behaviour of leaders will vary depending on the maturity of their epistemological beliefs’ (Tickle et al., 2005, p. 9). Epistemological beliefs potentially can explain differences in leadership behaviours along a transformational–transactional continuum of leadership behaviours.

In this paper, we argue that epistemological beliefs can be considered to be a core set of measurable characteristics to profile leaders. It is clear from research that epistemological beliefs have a filtering role in creating knowledge and beliefs and therefore influence teaching practices. Research related to epistemological beliefs provides a unique way in which to investigate and construct leadership in organisations (Tickle et al., 2005). This pilot study investigates the viability of the Tickle et al. (2005) framework for identifying leadership in ECEC.

The study

The aim of this study was to investigate leadership by investigating the relationship between beliefs about
leading and beliefs about knowing held by directors of long day care centres. Fifteen centre directors were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews through telephone contact. Participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate, which reflects convenience sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Demographics

The 15 participants directed long day care centres in the metropolitan area of a large Australian city, and from a regional township north of that city. Ten directors worked in not-for-profit community-based centres and five worked in private centres. One participant was male. Length of experience as directors ranged from six months to 16 years. While most of the participants had several years of experience in child care before achieving the position of director, one participant had been appointed to the role immediately upon graduating from a university-based graduate early childhood degree, another had previously worked in a human services position in a government department, and a third had previous experience as a school principal. While most participants had group leader and other childcare experience elsewhere, 10 of the 15 participants had not held the role of director in locations other than their current centre.

Qualifications held by the participants included two- and three-year technical and further education (TAFE) awards in child care, three- and four-year early childhood degrees from universities, and graduate early childhood degrees from universities. Two directors held both TAFE and university awards. Along with their early childhood qualifications, four of the participants held degrees in other disciplines including primary teaching, sports medicine, occupational therapy and psychology. One director was currently upgrading her qualifications and several reported ongoing attendances at in-service childcare-related workshops. Half of the group mentioned that they were members of childcare-related associations, and three directors reported that they were actively involved in these. One director was a National Childcare Accreditation Council validator, and one indicated that she played an advocacy role in the National Association of Community Based Children’s Services.

The interview process

Director interviews took between 30 and 40 minutes, were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim. In a pilot study, Nailon, Brownlee, Tickle and Sanderson (2005) trialled semi-structured interview questions to elicit beliefs about personal epistemology and leadership.

The epistemological beliefs questions were structured to reflect Burr and Hofer’s (2002) framework. This framework describes personal epistemology in terms of two main dimensions: beliefs about knowing and beliefs about knowledge. Beliefs about knowing include questions about how we process (Is knowledge constructed or transmitted?) and justify (Do we rely on external authority or is knowledge internally located?) knowledge claims. Beliefs about knowledge involve asking questions that are related to the certainty (knowledge is absolute or evolving) and simplicity (knowledge is integrated or separate) of knowledge. See Appendix for questions that reflect these four dimensions.

The leadership questions reflected the dimensions of transformational/transactional leadership described earlier. These questions tapped into their views about:

- effective leadership in the context of high-quality child care (investigates idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, management by exception, contingent reward)
- the promotion of workplace goals (investigates inspirational motivation, contingent reward)
- how they influence staff for optimal outcomes (investigates inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, management by exception, contingent reward)
- their view about workplace learning (investigates intellectual stimulation) (see Appendix for specific interview questions).

Investigating transformational/transactional leadership through the lens of epistemological beliefs is a new construct, so it was considered important to use interviews rather than pre-existing surveys (for example, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire—MLQ) to allow for categories to emerge. The questions also needed to be open-ended to allow for participants’ voices to be heard, rather than imposing questions that were predetermined. This interpretivist paradigm enabled us to gain a richness of perspectives from the participants.

Analysing the interviews

The interviews were analysed for beliefs about leadership and beliefs about knowing using a descriptive–interpretive approach. This means that although categories of responses emerged from the data, the relevant literature regarding leadership and epistemological beliefs heavily influenced how the categories were derived (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The process of analysis involved three stages. First, each transcript was read to identify comments that aligned with descriptors contained in the MLQ. Individuals varied in the focus of their responses. For example, when leadership questions were asked, there was a focus from some individuals on transformational ideas related to inspirational motivation or idealised influence. Others did not focus on these indicators, but described other dimensions of transformational leadership, such as intellectual stimulation or individual consideration. The foci and the range of responses may have varied, but participant responses
were able to be identified as primarily transformational. The category of ‘transactional beliefs’ was derived by considering the extent to which the dimensions of management by exception and contingent reward were evident in their responses.

All 15 directors described beliefs or behaviours that were indicative of both transformational and transactional leadership characteristics. However, depending on the number and the qualitative differences in their responses, directors were allocated to the following categories: high transformational leadership beliefs; multiple leadership beliefs; and low transformational beliefs. Specifically, participants were rated on each of the four transformational attributes (idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration and inspirational motivation), and transactional attributes (contingent reward and active management by exception). According to the number of statements, they were given a rating of low (one to two statements), medium (three to six statements) or high (seven statements and above). Statements were only used if it was clear from their response that they were referring to a particular dimension of leadership. This means that statements had to have sufficient detail to enable us to make a decision about the nature of their response. Each participant could then be ranked according to the level of transformational/transactional beliefs discussed in their interviews.

Second, the transcripts were read for epistemological beliefs. The Burr and Hofer (2002) framework was used to devise questions. This meant that responses were broadly related to the nature of:

- knowing (certainty of knowledge and justification for coordinating theory and evidence)
- knowledge (certainty of knowledge and simplicity of knowledge)
- learning (approaches to learning).

Although responses related to epistemological beliefs were often mixed, the predominant orientation could be identified and described. Individuals described as holding evaluativist beliefs responded consistently throughout the interview in a way that indicated that knowledge was evolving, tentative and personally constructed on the basis of available evidence. Occasionally an individual would indicate in passing that, in some domains, ‘facts’ might exist, such as in the discipline of mathematics. Conversely, those individuals who espoused objectivist beliefs consistently referred to knowledge as black and white, and able to be transmitted to others with an occasional indication that opinions also constituted knowledge. The category referred to as mixed epistemological beliefs included individuals who could not be clearly considered to be evaluativist or objectivist in their orientation, and represented a mix of beliefs.

Third, beliefs about leadership and knowing for each centre director were clustered to enable further investigation into the relationship between these two distinct sets of beliefs. This enabled profiles to be developed for each of the centre directors. These profiles provided a way to see if relationships existed between epistemological beliefs and beliefs about leadership.

Trustworthiness in data analysis was addressed through dialogic reliability checking. This process involved the two researchers reaching consensus on the coding of data through ‘discussion and mutual critique of the data and of each researcher’s interpretative hypothesis’ (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 331). In dialogic reliability checking, there is no one right way to categorise data, although coding needs to be perceived to be a reasonable interpretation (Åkerlind, 2005). In this study, each researcher took responsibility for coding different aspects of each interview. One author, with extensive research experience in personal epistemology interview analysis, coded the epistemological beliefs questions in each interview. The second researcher, with extensive leadership expertise, took responsibility for the coding of the leadership questions. Each researcher then read a percentage of the other researcher’s codes (approximately 20%) to establish dialogic reliability. Where disagreement occurred, the researchers discussed coding and eventually agreement was reached. This approach to trustworthiness in data analysis is typical of research conducted from an interpretivist paradigm.

Findings

The profiles of the centre directors could be described as belonging to one of the following clusters: high transformational leadership beliefs and evaluativist epistemological beliefs; multiple leadership beliefs and mixed epistemological beliefs; and high transactional leadership beliefs and objectivist epistemological beliefs. The profiles are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Beliefs about leadership and epistemological beliefs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre directors</th>
<th>Leadership beliefs</th>
<th>Epistemological beliefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne, Josie, Roberta, Stephanie, Patsie</td>
<td>High transformational (&amp; low transactional)</td>
<td>Evaluativist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess, Lyn, Ros Jess, Catrina, Martha, Desley, Carmel, Coral</td>
<td>Multiple (mix of transformational &amp; transactional)</td>
<td>Mixed (mix of evaluativist, subjectivist &amp; objectivist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russ</td>
<td>High transactional (&amp; low transformational)</td>
<td>Objectivist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High transformational leadership beliefs and evaluativist personal epistemologies

Five of the directors described mostly transformational leadership and evaluativist epistemological beliefs. Leadership comments used by each of these five directors included all of the MLQ transformational areas (idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration). These directors used language that indicated that the outcomes they were seeking centred on staff effectiveness, extra effort and satisfaction. While comments pertaining to individualised consideration were the most frequently used by this group of directors, intellectual stimulation also featured highly.

In terms of intellectual stimulation, there was a focus in their interviews on their trust in staff to build on personal strengths. Patsie commented that she thought a good leader was ‘one who trusted their people and gave them the freedom to experiment and grow themselves’. She described the way she worked with individual staff as ‘giving them ownership of the process’ and indicated that the staff were learners together. This was demonstrated in her comment that she often asked staff members, ‘What do you think we will do next?’ Josie also represents this inclusive approach to intellectual stimulation that was used by these directors: ‘You need to be able to think outside the square. We research different ways to solve problems or access more information to help our own performance … mine as well as theirs’.

Often the process of reflection featured highly in this group’s descriptions of staff performance and staff development. Stephanie commented that ‘[it’s] about getting people to talk a lot more about where they are—rather than me coming at them…’ Roberta said, ‘If I believe they [staff] are acting in an inappropriate way, then I talk with them about their way and other ways it could be done. I try to give re-direction without squashing totally their self-esteem and their philosophy—how they go about things’. She added, ‘If something doesn’t work, then reflect on it … if they [staff] created something and it didn’t flow the way they wanted it to or if they get a negative response then they reflect on that and handle it differently next time’. Such a reflective capacity is a key characteristic of evaluativist epistemological beliefs (Hofer, 2004).

Additional comments related to intellectual stimulation included building personal strengths, providing the freedom to experiment and grow, promoting ownership of the process and being co-learners in the process of leadership. All of these behaviours are indicative of a transformative or constructivist approach to facilitating learning and such practices are often associated with evaluativist beliefs (e.g. Arredondo & Rucinski, 1996; Chan & Elliott, 2000).

As well as transformative leadership behaviours, the directors espoused predominantly evaluativist epistemological beliefs. They considered that knowledge was evolving and personally constructed, but always needed to be critiqued.

There are lots of truths, not just one. The best was something about it or reduce it down to more about being authentic to the situation, the moment, the context, rather than being any sort of abstract rightness or wrongness. Certainly it’s not a universal thing, I think that truth is very local, and particular and very embedded in the situation (Stephanie).

This suggests that the dimension of intellectual stimulation seems to have some common ground with evaluativist personal epistemological beliefs.

These directors also made a very limited number of comments that reflected transactional categories. Their comments focused on the monitoring and modelling of standards, and on associating standards with accountability. While the category management by exception (active) infers the leadership focus is on errors, mistakes and failures, these five directors mentioned the use of positive approaches to re-directing behaviour. They also indicated that they trusted their staff members’ capabilities. The following comment from Patsie reflects the transactional approaches used: ‘You’re continually reinforcing to them that I regard you as a professional, that I respect your desire to be committed to this position, and you certainly have the ability and the knowledge to do that’. Performance reviews were mentioned by two members of this group as providing the opportunity to plan for staff development and to reward staff when expectations were met. These comments were categorised under the transactional area of contingent reward.

Multiple leadership beliefs and mixed personal epistemologies

Nine directors were described as holding multiple leadership beliefs because there was no clear focus on either transformational or transactional beliefs. These leaders also described a range of epistemological beliefs. This group of leaders was much more varied in their beliefs than the previous profile, so here we use the responses of two directors, Tess and Carmel, to exemplify the variations evident in these beliefs. These leaders described both transactional and transformational beliefs but their personal epistemologies varied in different ways.

Tess held mixed beliefs about leadership and personal epistemology. Transactional leadership is implied in her responses. She commented that it was important to offer staff rewards, like making them feel good about themselves which is a characteristic of transactional leadership, in particular management by contingent reward. However, she also described transformational leadership beliefs such as, ‘Good leadership is not so much being the boss but being a guide … [This] helps the team run and helps make the final decision based on the team decision’. This suggests that she is aware that staff need to
be a feature of the dimension of intellectual stimulation.

Her mixed leadership beliefs are reflected in a mixed personal epistemology that comprises both objectivist and subjectivist beliefs. The comments below indicate an objectivist stance with a clear belief in absolute truths or right/wrong answers.

The younger staff probably feel that something they’re going to get into trouble for, something they’ve done wrong. You find that, whereas your older staff tend to be probably, step up and say, ‘Look I’ve done the wrong thing. This is what’s happened’. So I think if I … I kind of tend to notice the truth coming more from senior staff than the younger staff, who are still panicking about whether they’ve got a job or whether they’ve done the wrong thing, or … yes, so I suppose being truthful as a leader is very important too. Not keeping secrets and that type of thing (Tess).

She also described subjectivist beliefs where knowing and knowledge involves an acceptance of multiple perspectives in her leadership role, equal valuing of different opinions and recognition that knowledge is related more to an intuitive feeling than an evidenced-based response. This view that knowledge is personally constructed (without the need for evidence) can be seen in her comment, ‘Good leadership is not so much being the boss but being a guide … helps the team run and helps make the final decision based on the team decision’. This reflects a view of knowledge as constructed, however there is no suggestion that this reflection should be evidenced based; for example, reflecting on recent research or other practices.

Carmel described transformational and transactional leadership beliefs. With regard to transformational leadership, she was mostly concerned with individualised consideration within the context of the group and intellectual stimulation—‘looking at things from another angle’ and allowing staff time to sort their problems out for themselves ‘knowing I’m here to bounce ideas with’. With regard to transactional leadership behaviours, she talked about the use of contingent rewards frequently, which was associated with her personal development as a leader: ‘Now that I’ve got lots of knowledge, and I know what I like and what I don’t like … I give lots of positive praise’.

Carmel held a range of epistemological beliefs. In the following comment, while indicating a focus on intellectual stimulation, she is clearly transmissive in nature and more in line with the objective personal epistemology she espouses: ‘To be a good leader for staff is trying to be ahead as much as possible in knowledge—so that when they seek knowledge you’re hopefully able to give that knowledge to them. Pass it on’. She also displayed beliefs that personal opinions were important, suggesting a subjectivist set of beliefs about knowing and knowledge.

High transactional leadership beliefs and objectivist epistemological beliefs

Only one director, Russ, made statements that reflected predominantly transactional beliefs. In particular, this director focused on management by exception (active). He made comments such as, ‘There is a need to have someone at the top that can make decisions, have procedures in place. My staff come to me about issues and they are sorted out straight away … someone has to make the hard decisions …’ Russ also described an objectivist personal epistemology where knowing and knowledge is seen as absolute and reproduced. This involved a view that there is a right way to do something, and that the leader often has this ‘truth’ to pass onto staff.

Discussion

Currently child care is a national priority in Australia with high-quality care reliably linked to the quality of group leaders and centre directors (Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council, 2001; OECD, 2001). High-quality childcare centres tend to employ directors with more effective leadership skills (Lower & Cassidy, 2007; Whitebrook & Sakai, 2004). While the use of transactional leadership skills have been shown to progress an organisation towards meeting organisational goals, those who focus on organisational climate and learning outcomes may have more efficacy in child care and education. Effective leaders in childcare organisations can be described as transformational because they enable staff to perform beyond expectations (Krishnan, 2001) and focus on the notion of a learning organisation (Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002). They promote trust and respect, are committed to the organisation and encourage staff to think and learn by actively constructing their own meaning (Bass, 1985), which impacts on staff intrinsic motivation and commitment. In contrast, transactional leaders initiate goals, define staff roles and then offer rewards for staff to complete tasks (Gardner & Stough, 2002) and do not focus on engaging staff in a constructivist learning process.

Both a theoretical (Tickle et al., 2005) and an empirical case have been presented for the relationship between epistemological beliefs and leadership behaviours as a unique identifier of effective leadership in ECEC. Theoretically, Tickle et al. (2005) proposed that the relationship between evaluativist epistemological beliefs and transformative (constructivist) teaching approaches might also be present in the context of transformational leadership. This argument was based on the notion that the four dimensions of transformational leadership are similar to the key characteristics of transformative teaching: idealised influence (trust and respect), inspirational motivation (promote intrinsic motivation), intellectual stimulation (encourage staff to think and learn in creative and stimulating ways), and individualised consideration (engage with staff members as individuals). Gaining trust, promoting intrinsic motivation, focusing on deep approaches to learning, and
individualising learning are the corresponding dimensions of a constructively aligned teacher (Brownlee, 2000).

In support of this proposed theoretical relationship, the findings of the current study have demonstrated empirically that a relationship exists between the two constructs. Childcare directors who described predominantly transformational leadership beliefs also indicated core beliefs about knowing that were evaluativist in nature. This means that they viewed knowledge as evolving, tentative and needing to be critiqued and evaluated in the light of evidence. Such evaluation requires reflection because, to make a critical assessment of the validity of knowledge, one must be able to weigh up evidence and draw conclusions based on such evaluations. A strong reflective capacity was also described by those directors with high transformational leadership beliefs and evaluativist epistemological beliefs. Conversely, the director with a predominantly transactional approach to leadership clearly demonstrated beliefs that knowledge was about ‘truths’ or absolute facts that could be transmitted to others. Such beliefs about knowledge demonstrate a somewhat less reflective capacity because, in order to process information as right or wrong, one must merely allocate knowledge to a particular category rather than needing to analyse and critique the information in a sustained way. Those directors who had a mixed profile of leadership beliefs also held mixed epistemological beliefs which involved a range of beliefs from objectivism through to evaluativism.

While this study demonstrates a link between personal epistemology and approaches to leadership, what is not clear is why a centre director may be predisposed to complex epistemologies and transformational leadership. This is an area that could be pursued in further research. To date, transformational leadership research has been concerned with investigating what factors might cause leaders to engage in transformational approaches to leadership (Barling, et al., 2000; Kelloway & Barling, 2000; Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002). It seems that the beliefs leaders hold may provide some interesting new directions for investigating an individual’s approach to leadership (Russell, 2001). Specifically, focusing on an individual’s epistemological beliefs may help us to find ways to identify and nurture transformational leaders in ECEC. The findings of this study have provided a justification for further exploration of leadership behaviours using the construct of epistemological beliefs. In doing so, it might be possible to construct a clearer identity for leadership in ECEC in Australia.

It is possible that the programs described in educational research that demonstrate success in nurturing the development of epistemological beliefs may provide some insight into how to develop programs that promote such beliefs in ECEC leaders. Scheck and Sinatra (2004) describe how change in epistemological beliefs is possible through direct instruction and reflection on beliefs as well as a focus on encouraging deep approaches to learning. Such explicit reflection on beliefs often relies on using a process of equilibration (Bendixen, 2002). Equilibration involves being dissatisfied with current beliefs, and then acquiring new beliefs that appear plausible (Hofer, 2002). Conceptual change theory, grounded in the processes of equilibration, is suggested as a way of describing how personal epistemology changes over time. This process involves:

- recognition by the individual that existing beliefs are not adequate
- a clear understanding of the new beliefs
- an ability to make use of the new beliefs
- finally, the ability of the new beliefs to be robust in nature and influence further knowledge development (Pintrich, Marx & Boyle, 1993, in Bendixen, 2002; Posner et al., 1982).

This range of research suggests that explicit reflection on epistemological beliefs promotes development. In these studies, participants have been encouraged to directly reflect on their own epistemological beliefs using a range of methods, such as group discussions, journals, and peer interviews. Such confrontation of core beliefs means that individuals have been required to re-evaluate their beliefs in the context of alternative ways of knowing. These approaches may prove to be a useful starting point for ECEC leadership programs aimed at promoting the development of epistemological beliefs and transformational leadership practices. Personal epistemology offers a new and significant field of inquiry for investigating leadership in child care and, in the long term, helping to create leadership identity in ECEC.

Appendix

Beliefs about leadership

- In your opinion, what makes a childcare centre successful?
- Can you describe what you think good leadership is in child care? Why? (investigates idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, management by exception, contingent reward)
- Can you tell me about how you perceive the relationship between leadership and high-quality child care?
- What have you done as director to advance the organisation’s goals? (investigates inspirational motivation, contingent reward)
- In your capacity as director, how do you work with people to get the best outcomes? Can you give examples of how you do this? (investigates idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, contingent reward)
How does this centre influence the way you lead staff in this centre as opposed to other centres?

Beliefs about subordinates’ learning

- How do you think your staff learn? (investigates intellectual stimulation)
- Can you describe an experience that you have had with a staff member/s where you really noticed that they had learnt something? (investigates intellectual stimulation)
- How do you know when staff have learnt something? (investigates intellectual stimulation)

Role of experts (beliefs about knowing/learning)

- In learning about something you really want to know related to being a centre director, what is the role of an expert?
- How do you know someone is an expert?
- What do you feel and what do you do when experts disagree?
- If experts disagree on something today, do you think that some day they will come to some agreement? Why or why not?
- What is learning?
- What are the most important sources of knowledge that will influence your practice as a centre director?
- How would you go about learning something that you needed to know that would help you in your management of the centre? Can you tell me about the learning processes you would undertake specifically? (What is going on inside your head?)
- How do you know when you have learnt something?

Beliefs about truth (beliefs about knowledge)

- Do you agree with the idea that there are no right answers in child care and that anybody’s opinion is as good as another’s?
- Can you think of an opinion that you think is wrong?
- How do you know what is right/true in childcare leadership?
- Sometimes people talk about ‘the right answers or truth in child care’. What are your views?
- What if 12 childcare workers all said that their centre director was a good director? Does that mean they are a good director? Are some directors better than others? (If yes) What makes them better? Can you describe what you think good leadership is in child care? Why?
- Can you tell me about how you perceive the relationship between leadership and high-quality child care?

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Influences of the family and childcare food environments on preschoolers’ healthy eating

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THE STUDY EXTENDS CAMPBELL, Crawford and Ball’s (2006) findings that the family food environment influences eating in children by examining whether young children’s food intake at home is also influenced by the childcare food environment. Participants were 103 parents of children aged three to five years who attended childcare centres in South Australia. Centres had either obtained the ‘Start Right Eat Right’ (SRER) nutrition certification; an award associated with compliance with the government’s healthy eating guidelines, or had not attained certification with SRER. Participating parents completed a questionnaire measuring the family food environment as well as a food frequency questionnaire that recorded children’s intake of ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ foods. Parents of children at SRER centres reported that their children ate more healthy food choices at home, as measured using the food frequency questionnaire, than parents of children attending non-SRER accredited centres. Pressure to eat, parental modelling, monitoring and perceptions of adequacy of a child’s diet were all associated with children’s eating. The results suggest that childcare centres, in addition to the family environment, can have an important role to play in developing healthy dietary choices in preschool children.

Introduction

Recent reports suggest that children’s diets are not meeting the healthy eating guidelines, with inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables and excessive consumption of saturated fat, sugar and salt (Cooke et al., 2003; Magarey, Daniels & Boulton, 2001; Taylor, Gallagher & McCullough, 2004). This is a major concern because diet during childhood not only affects immediate growth and development but also influences health in later life. Early childhood is a critical time during which many eating behaviours are learnt and it is important to recognise that behaviours learnt in this period may be sustained into adult life (Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet & Issanchou, 2004; Russell & Worsley, 2007; Skinner, Carruth, Bounds & Ziegler, 2002).

In the preschool age group, there are two major environments that are likely to affect eating behaviour—the ‘family food environment’ (FFE) and the ‘childcare centre food environment’ (CCFE). Research has established that the main factors in the FFE that influence children’s eating behaviour are food availability (Campbell et al., 2002; Campbell, Crawford & Ball, 2006; Cooke et al., 2003), parental control and restriction (Birch & Fisher, 1998; Brown & Ogden, 2004; Campbell et al., 2006; Carper, Fisher & Birch, 2000; Cullen et al., 2000; Patrick, Nicklas, Hughes & Morales, 2005) and parental modelling (Campbell et al., 2006; Gillman et al., 2000).

Research has yet to establish the potential impact of dietary behaviours learnt in preschool childcare environments that are outside the home. This is an important area to address as increasingly more children attend formal day care (ABS, 2005; Bushnik, 2006). The food provided at these services, the behaviour of the staff in these environments and the manner in which food access is controlled are all likely to have an influence on young children’s eating behaviours. Evidence providing some confirmation of this has been reported; Hendy and Raudenbush (1999) showed that modelling of dietary behaviour influenced children’s eating behaviour in childcare centres.

A program called ‘Start Right Eat Right’ (SRER) has been implemented in South Australia with the aim of increasing the ability of childcare centres to provide children with safe and healthy food choices (Pollard, Lewis & Miller, 2001). To obtain the SRER award, childcare centres must demonstrate that they provide a nutritionally adequate menu—which supplies children with 50% of their recommended dietary intake of nutrients and energy—utilise good food hygiene practices and maintain a positive eating environment for the children.
Although this program may have an impact on child nutrition and eating behaviour, evidence suggests that parents may have the greatest influence in the development of children’s habitual behaviours (Nicklas et al., 2001). Moreover, researchers have argued that childcare providers do not view themselves as primarily responsible for children’s behaviour (Ahern & Lamb, 2004). Thus, while the childcare environment is important, and may impact on a range of habitual behaviour, including food choice, parental influence is likely to remain the most important factor in the development of children’s eating patterns.

This paper describes an investigation into the influences of the family food environment and childcare environment on preschoolers’ eating behaviour. It focuses on the potential of structured nutrition programs like ‘Start Right Eat Right’ to have a significant effect on childhood eating behaviour, over and above the influence arising from the family.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 103 parents of children aged three to five years who had been attending a childcare centre in South Australia for more than two months. Thirty-four childcare centres were asked to be in the study and 12 of these agreed to be involved (that is, a 35% response rate). These included seven centres that had participated in a nutritional guidance program provided by ‘Start Right Eat Right’ (SRER) and had obtained the SRER award (n = 72 parents of children attending these centres), as well as five centres that were not involved with SRER (n = 31). Out of the 388 questionnaires distributed to parents, 113 were returned; a 29% response rate. Six participants were excluded from the study because their child had been sick with an illness that affected their appetite in the week before participating in the study. Four additional participants were excluded because their child had not been at their current childcare centre for at least two months. Respondents were the caregivers most responsible for feeding their three- to five-year-old child and were mostly mothers (5% were fathers).

**Materials**

**Family food environment (FFE) measure**

The family food environment (FFE) was measured using a self-report questionnaire developed by Campbell et al. (2006) that includes questions from the child feeding questionnaire (Birch et al., 2001). The original questionnaire was modified for the current study by removing questions about television viewing time and physical activity because these were not the focus of the study. The factors measured by the questionnaire included parental perceptions of adequacy of child’s diet (six items), barriers to food availability/accessibility (seven items), monitoring child’s diet (three items), restriction of eating (four items), modelling (four items), confidence in cooking (three items), television viewing during meals (two items) and pressure to eat (four items). The questionnaire contained statements to which participants responded by circling the response that best described their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale. Items included ‘If I did not guide or regulate my child’s eating, he/she would eat too many junk foods’ and ‘Adult work schedules often make it difficult to have the evening meal together’.

**Healthiness of foods eaten at home**

A food frequency questionnaire (FFQ), developed from items used by Campbell et al. (2006), was used to measure the healthiness of foods eaten by the preschooler at home. The parent-report FFQ was a 48-item questionnaire based on data from the 1995 Australian National Nutrition Survey (ABS, 1998). The FFQ measured five categories of foods: vegetables, fruits, savoury snacks, sweet snacks and high-energy (non-dairy) fluids. Vegetables and fruits were chosen to represent ‘healthy’ foods and savoury snacks, sweet snacks and high-energy fluids were chosen to represent ‘unhealthy’ foods. These ‘unhealthy’ foods have been shown to be major contributors to energy and fat intakes for children aged two to 11 years (ABS, 1998). Potatoes were not included in the category of vegetables as Australian data shows that around half of all children’s vegetable intake is potato and most of this is fried (46%) or has fat added (28%), raising its energy density and making it less ‘healthy’ (Campbell & Crawford, 2001).

Parents in the study were asked to indicate how many times their child had eaten certain foods while they were at home in the past week. Participants responded by placing a tick by the response which best described their child’s intake of a particular food (fruit, vegetables, savoury snack foods, sweet snack foods and high-energy drinks). This data was then recoded to give values representing the frequency of a child’s intake of a particular food per week. Reliability of the various food groups produced from the FFQ has been assessed by Campbell et al. (2006). Intra-class correlations (ICC) for high-energy fluids, sweet snacks, fruits and vegetables were excellent (ranging from ICC = 0.84 to 0.86) and for savoury-snak intake were moderate (ICC = 0.56).

**Measuring healthiness of foods eaten at the childcare centre**

Two weeks of food menus were obtained with permission from all except one childcare centre involved in the study. The menus were scored using a nutrition checklist used by SRER officers. This was based on one produced by the South Australian Child Care Nutrition Partnership (2005). Menus were scored by summing the total number of times the menu adhered to each requirement on the nutrition checklist. For example, the nutrition checklist required childcare centres to serve 10 serves of vegetables per fortnight, so if a centre served eight vegetables, the...
menu would receive a score of eight points for vegetables. The nutrition checklist allowed only one high-fat food per week, so points were removed for additional high-fat foods present on a centre’s menu. The maximum number of points a menu could obtain was 107.

**Background information**

Participating parents were asked to provide information about their age, sex, weight and height, education and employment, living arrangement, postcode and marital status. If they had a partner, they were also requested to provide the same details for them. Weight and height were required to calculate the body mass index (BMI) of participants and partners. Participants were then allocated to BMI categories, as used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2007). Education level of participants was collected because parental education may be used as a marker for socioeconomic status and has been shown to influence children’s eating behaviour (Cooke et al., 2003). Participants were asked to provide the postcode of the area in which they lived to provide another marker for socioeconomic status. Postcodes were then used to allocate socioeconomic scores to participants, based on the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) (ABS, 2001).

Participants were also asked to provide information about their three- to five-year-old child’s birth date, weight and height and number of siblings. Birth date was required in order to check that children were in the age group of three to five years. All children in the study were in the target age group. Measures of weight and height were required to calculate child's BMI, but most respondents did not provide responses for one or both measures, consequently children's BMIs were not included in analyses.

Background information was obtained from participants through a self-report questionnaire. When surveys were collected, the name of the childcare centre and whether it had the SRER award was recorded. Childcare centres were assigned scores for socioeconomic status based on their postcodes using the IRSD (ABS, 2001).

**Procedure**

Ethics approval for the present study was obtained from the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services, as well as the Human Research Ethics Subcommittee of the School of Psychology at The University of Adelaide. Directors of childcare centres were provided with written and/or verbal information about the study and asked if they wanted to participate. Directors were asked to give parents of three- to five-year-old children envelopes containing the survey materials and a letter containing information about the study. Parents who wished to participate in the study completed the survey materials and returned them to their child’s childcare centre.

**Results**

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess differences in age, socioeconomic status, BMI and education level between parents from SRER and non-SRER groups in order to test whether differences in nutrition practices at these centres were associated with differences in other variables likely to impact on children’s food choices. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. There was no significant difference in BMI between SRER and non-SRER groups (t(105) = −0.57, p = 0.570). A significant difference was found for age (t(100) = 3.27, p = 0.001). There was also a significant difference in residential socioeconomic status (t(101) = 5.80, p < 0.000). Parents in the SRER group were older and of a higher socioeconomic status than parents in the non-SRER group. There was also a difference approaching significance for education level (t(43) = 1.97, p = 0.055), so that higher parental education was found among children attending SRER centres. This suggests that any differences in children’s eating behaviour found between SRER and non-SRER groups may not be due to differences in nutrition practices but due to differences in mean age of parent or socioeconomic status.

**Table 1. Age and socioeconomic status of participants from SRER* (n = 72) and non-SRER centres (n = 31)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SRER Mean</th>
<th>SRER SD</th>
<th>Non-SRER Mean</th>
<th>Non-SRER SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>37.69</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>34.37</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
<td>1063.40</td>
<td>55.23</td>
<td>989.53</td>
<td>67.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body mass index</td>
<td>24.15</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>24.64</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Start Right Eat Right

**Childcare centre characteristics**

Scores on the SRER guidelines as assessed by examination of menus were compared between the childcare centres that were accredited and those that were not. This comparison was undertaken to confirm the validity of group assignment. Socioeconomic status of the centres was also determined. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess group differences in socioeconomic status and healthiness of menus between SRER and non-SRER childcare centres. There was a difference approaching significance for socioeconomic status between SRER and non-SRER childcare centres (means = 1063.40 (55.23) and 989.53 (67.99), respectively, t(109) = −1.95, p = 0.053). A significant group difference was found for healthiness of menus (means = 94.71 (4.58) and 62.68 (7.90), t(105) = 25.91, p < 0.001), with SRER childcare centres having significantly healthier menus than non-SRER centres. This analysis confirmed the validity of group assignment.
Factor analysis of family food environment questionnaire

Factor analysis was conducted to determine the underlying factors in the FFE questionnaire. The 38 items in the FFE grouped onto 10 factors with Eigen values above 1.0 and explained 62.6% of the total variance. Campbell et al. (2006) reported that the 38 items of the FFE scale loaded onto nine factors and explained 48.1% of the total variance. Nonetheless, after inspection of scree plots, Eigen values and interpretability of factors, an eight-factor solution was deemed to be best fitting in the current study. These eight factors explained 58.9% of the total variance. The remaining factors were dropped from further analysis due to their small contributions. Items with rotated loadings greater than 0.4 were incorporated within the final model.

Influence of the family food environment on eating by all children

Linear regression was conducted looking at the influence of predictor variables (factor scores) on the outcome variables (consumption scores) in order to test the hypothesis that factors in the FFE would influence children’s eating. Children from SRER and non-SRER groups were combined for these regression analyses.

Increased pressure to eat was the only FFE predictor that was significantly associated with an increase in children’s intake of high-energy fluids ($t = 2.88$, $p = 0.005$). As Table 2 shows, the association was found to be small (multiple $R = 0.32$), accounting for 5.2% of the variance in children’s intake of high-energy fluids. The factors ‘modelling’ and ‘TV during meals’ also approached significance, with greater monitoring resulting in lower intake and watching TV during meals being associated with greater intake.

None of the FFE predictors was significantly associated with children’s intake of savoury or sweet snacks. Table 3 shows that an increase in parental perceptions of the adequacy of child’s diet was positively associated with children’s intake of fruit ($t = 2.32$, $p = 0.023$). The association was small (multiple $R = 0.25$), explaining 5.2% of the variance in children’s fruit consumption. The effect of ‘modelling’ approached significance with greater child intake of fruit associated with greater modelling of intake by parents.

Table 4 shows that there were positive associations between children’s intake of vegetables and an increase in ‘perceptions of adequacy of child’s diet’ ($t = 4.54$, $p < 0.001$), parental ‘modelling’ ($t = 2.25$, $p = 0.027$) and an increase in ‘monitoring’ ($t = 2.35$, $p = 0.021$). Perceptions of adequacy of child’s diet, monitoring and parental modelling together accounted for 27.1% of the variance in children’s vegetable intake. Perception of adequacy of child’s diet made about twice the contribution of any of the other significant variables.

Table 2. Regression analysis of family food environment and children’s intake of high-energy fluids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Unstandardised regression coefficient (95% CI)</th>
<th>Standardised regression coefficient</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of adequacy of child’s diet</td>
<td>0.23 (–1.19 to 1.64)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to food availability/accessibility</td>
<td>0.47 (–0.98 to 1.91)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>–1.29 (–2.68 to 0.11)</td>
<td>–0.20</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of eating</td>
<td>0.45 (–1.04 to 1.94)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>–0.38 (–1.89 to 1.14)</td>
<td>–0.05</td>
<td>0.621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in cooking</td>
<td>0.84 (–0.67 to 2.36)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV during meals</td>
<td>1.28 (–0.29 to 2.68)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to eat</td>
<td>2.24 (0.69 to 3.79)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences in children’s eating between SRER and non-SRER centres

Independent t-tests were undertaken to test the hypothesis that children attending SRER childcare centres would consume more healthy foods and less unhealthy foods, as measured by parent reported FFQ, than children who did not attend SRER centres. The only significant difference between means was found for children’s consumption of savoury snacks ($t(100) = −2.93$, $p = 0.004$). Age of parent and IRSD were not responsible for this relationship, as they were not associated with intake of savoury snacks. Children at SRER centres consumed an average of 4.2 savoury snacks per week, whereas children at non-SRER centres consumed an average of 6.6 savoury snacks per week.

In order to test the hypothesis that the quality of the FFE would moderate the association between childcare centre food environment (CCFE) and children’s healthy eating, several conditions needed to be met. First, the CCFE had to significantly influence children’s healthy eating. As already described, a significant difference was only found in savoury snack consumption between SRER and non-SRER groups. Second, factors in the FFE had to be associated with measures of children’s healthy eating that differed between SRER and non-SRER groups. Savoury snack consumption was not associated with any factors in the FFE. Consequently, there was no suggestion that the CCFE mediated or moderated the relationship between the FFE and children’s food intake.
In summary, the results indicate that the context (that is, home versus childcare centre) may influence different aspects of food choice. Healthy food consumption may be learnt primarily at home through appropriate parenting practices, including monitoring and modelling. Some aspects of less healthy consumption are also predicted by family routines and concern about children’s consumption levels; high-energy fluid intake was influenced by the watching of TV during meals, and by parental pressure to eat. However, children’s consumption of savoury snacks at home did relate to their availability within the childcare setting.

**Discussion**

The current study extends previous research on children's healthy eating by focusing on a younger age group and assessing the importance of both the FFE and the CCFE. Linear regression results indicate that the FFE influences preschoolers’ consumption of fruits, vegetables and high-energy fluids. The findings of the current study suggest that efforts to promote children’s healthy eating may benefit from programs targeted at the parents of children at a young age. Further, it may be beneficial to educate parents, not only about good nutrition for children but also about the factors in the FFE that are associated with healthy-eating behaviour in children.

The results further suggest that the Start Right Eat Right (SRER) nutrition accreditation has an ongoing association with the foods provided at childcare centres. SRER centres were shown to have significantly more nutritious menus than non-SRER centres. The findings also indicate that children who attend SRER childcare centres are likely to have healthier diets at home than those who do not attend SRER centres. The SRER program may have the potential to influence the eating behaviour of children beyond the immediate childcare environment. This may occur due to the impact of the positive eating environment of SRER childcare centres or may be the result of parental exposure to knowledge about healthy eating through contact with these centres. However, confounding of parental education, socioeconomic status of families and the centres, and parental age, with attendance at a SRER or non-SRER centre prevents definitive conclusions. Previous research has already established the impact of these confounds on children’s eating behaviour (for example, Cooke et al., 2003). The findings of the current study therefore provide only promising but limited support for the possible utility of nutrition programs, such as Start Right Eat Right. Nutrition programs designed for childcare centres, which focus on providing healthy foods as well as creating positive eating environments, may help to develop children's healthy eating behaviours.

The generalisability of the results of the current study is limited; the response rate was only 29%. Nonetheless, Campbell et al. (2006) reported a comparable response rate (33.7%), highlighting the difficulty in achieving high participation in this population. It is important that the

### Table 3. Regression analysis of family food environment and children’s intake of fruit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Unstandardised regression coefficient (95% CI)</th>
<th>Standardised regression coefficient</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of adequacy of child’s diet</td>
<td>3.41 (0.48 to 6.34)</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to food availability/accessibility</td>
<td>-2.24 (-5.23 to 0.75)</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>0.54 (-2.35 to 3.43)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of eating</td>
<td>-1.44 (-4.52 to 1.64)</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>2.84 (-0.29 to 5.96)</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in cooking</td>
<td>1.30 (-1.83 to 4.43)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV during meals</td>
<td>0.14 (-2.76 to 3.05)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to eat</td>
<td>0.59 (-2.57 to 3.75)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.711</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Regression analysis of family food environment and children’s intake of vegetables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Unstandardised regression coefficient (95% CI)</th>
<th>Standardised regression coefficient</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of adequacy of child’s diet</td>
<td>5.15 (2.89 to 7.41)</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to food availability/accessibility</td>
<td>-0.56 (-2.87 to 1.76)</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>2.62 (0.40 to 4.84)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of eating</td>
<td>0.33 (-2.05 to 2.71)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>2.72 (0.31 to 5.13)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in cooking</td>
<td>2.37 (-0.05 to 4.80)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV during meals</td>
<td>0.22 (-2.03 to 2.46)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to eat</td>
<td>0.76 (-1.68 to 3.21)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
results are replicated with a more representative sample of parents, childcare and family environments.

Although the amount of variance explained by the regression models for each of the dietary outcomes was fairly modest, ranging between 5% and 27%, this result was also consistent with Campbell et al.’s (2006). It is encouraging to note that the regression model was most successful in explaining vegetable intake, a dietary behaviour that it notoriously difficult to manage in young children.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties described above, the present study highlights the important role the FFE and the CCFE play in influencing children’s eating. Notwithstanding the failure to observe a mediating or moderating effect of the childcare environment on the relationship between the FFE and children’s intake of fruits, vegetables or high-energy liquids, there is a suggestion that availability of high-energy snacks within the CCFE is associated with higher consumption measured at home. This suggests that this environment may have the capacity to influence children’s eating beyond the influence emanating from the family environment. Further research should aim to identify the mechanism by which this occurs. Understanding the ways in which preschoolers’ healthy eating is influenced by the family and childcare environments is important for increasing the health of children, both now and in the future.

References


ABS (2001). Census of population and housing: Socio-economic indexes for areas (SEIFA), South Australia—Data cube only (Cat. No. 2033.4:55.001). Canberra: ABS.


Introduction

On 7 December 2009, the Council of Australian Governments announced the new National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care (see www.mychild.gov.au). One of the changes involves the requirement, by 1 January 2014, for an early childhood teacher to be in attendance in services, and for at least 50 per cent of staff to have, or be working towards a diploma-level (or higher) qualification (COAG, 2009). There are few who would argue that appropriately trained early childhood professionals are unnecessary for high-quality service delivery. However, training is not best represented by pre-service qualifications alone. Teachers’ practice is influenced not only by their pre-service training but by their values and the experiences they have had subsequent to graduation (Kennedy, 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008).

Despite this, research demonstrates that higher levels of training improve service delivery (Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Early childhood staff with more training engage in warmer and more responsive interactions with children, leading to improved child outcomes (Connor, Son, Hindman & Morrison, 2005). More training increases the likelihood that staff will be less authoritarian, less punishing, more sensitive and more able to demonstrate positive interaction styles (Abbott & Langston, 2005; Arnett, 1989; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford & Howes, 2002; de Kruijf, McWilliam & Ridley, 2000). When training is coupled with on-the-job support, such as mentoring (Fiene, 2002), significant improvements in children’s outcomes are more likely to be demonstrated.

Early childhood services are evolving and changing as we learn more about the importance of the early years, and the contexts in which we can best support children’s development. There is no doubt that early childhood professionals of the next decade will be undertaking different work in many ways than early childhood professionals of today. They will be working in different contexts with children whose needs are shaped by the changes in the world in which they live. It is essential to ensure that professionals working in these children’s services of the future (and in this I include childcare programs, preschools and parent–child centres/early childhood hubs) are trained appropriately for the work they are expected to do. In this paper, I discuss my vision of early childhood work of the future and the training that I believe is necessary to prepare professionals to undertake that work. In embarking on this task, I acknowledge the substantial work undertaken around preparation of teachers, and the impact of teachers’ practices on children’s outcomes (for example, Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts & Morrison, 2008). However, the focus is not on this work as such, but on my vision of the future directions of early childhood and what that means for pre-service preparation of the professionals working in this evolving field.

Early childhood services of the future

I believe that high-quality early childhood services are services in which each child’s individual needs are respected and provided for as a matter of course. They are services based on secure relationships between children and their carers/teachers, and between parents and carers/teachers; where family needs are met. They are services embedded in the local community, and thus representative of the local community and the families living there. Staff see themselves not simply working with children, but having responsibilities towards families and the community in which they are located.

In parent–child centres/early childhood hubs, high-quality service delivery will revolve around the triple responsibilities of workers—towards children, parents/families and the community. Some early childhood professionals in these services will be explicitly working with parents/families (for example, in family support, or parent education programs) while others will have more of a focus on children (for example, long day care programs, transition to school programs). The range of programs operating out of these centres will depend on the needs of the specific community in which each is located, and may include playgroups, parent support groups, and inclusion support programs. There may also be other programs operating out of the centres (such as drug/alcohol programs, family violence programs, supervised access programs etc.).

Margaret Sims
University of New England
What knowledge and skills do early childhood staff need to work in these services?

My argument is that early childhood staff will need a grounding in community work, as well as expertise in early childhood/family work, in order to adequately fulfil their responsibilities to children, parents/families and the community. I recently undertook a series of interviews (as part of a course review) to identify what existing children’s services workers thought made an ideal children’s services worker and I present some of these ideas here to inform my discussion. This was a very small consultation (a random sample of 15 graduates of the community work course at Edith Cowan University and nine major community work agencies in Perth, working with children and families in a variety of roles (Sims, 2008)).

Participants were clear about the things they thought were important in a good children’s services worker. They thought personal attributes were as important as skills and knowledge:

... and passion that comes from the spirit rather than just a passion to providing a good-quality service. I think anyone can do that. Making people see beyond the quality and into the stuff that makes a difference. And that is what good-quality training brings into the sector, it doesn’t shut down that bit that engages people’s spirit (Agency 7).

Other professional behaviours and attributes included:

- the ability to work independently and self-start (Agencies 2, 4 and 7)
- a willingness to learn (Agencies 2, 9)
- the ability to problem solve (Agency 5)
- commonsense (Graduate 15) and a balance between enthusiasm and what is do-able (Agency 2)
- an understanding of confidentiality (Graduates 13, 15): An integrated early childhood service worker said: ‘... clients don’t want to be acknowledged in the street. It’s humbling for them to come to the service’ (Agency 4).

The importance of interpersonal relationships, and the social skills necessary to build these, was strongly emphasised. Empathy is an important component of this (Graduates 2, 15): ‘You need to have empathy, helping them, almost walking alongside them’ (Graduate 14). A non-judgemental approach is also linked to this (Graduate 14, Agency 7): ‘... the ability to see things from other people’s perspective and bring them on board and work collegially, to get things across in a non-threatening way’ (Agency 5). Associated with this is a particular approach to working with people, a strengths-based approach (Agency 3): ‘You’ve got to work with what they have, not what you think they have, or you will set them up to fail’ (Graduate 14).

Good communication skills were seen as fundamental (Graduates 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, Agencies 1, 2, 4, 5):

Strong interpersonal skills are a must, you need to know how to listen to people ... You don’t necessarily have to be an expert in whatever problem they are in but, if you can listen, they feel as if they are listened to and that you are a good community worker (Graduate 9).

Communication skills also involve the ability to work as part of a team (Agency 2, 6) and working collaboratively across agencies and teams (Agency 3). Early childhood/family community workers use their interpersonal skills to build networks, partnerships and to identify resources and assets (strengths) they can use to assist in their work (Graduates 2, 6, 10, 11, 13, Agencies 1, 11): ‘... aware of what is needed in the community through reading and listening and translating that into supply and demand ...’ (Agency 1). This links to an awareness of the ‘bigger picture’ (Graduates 6, 9, Agency 1):

... see the big picture as well as see how the other things hang together, like how the money sits, economic justice. To be able to see the big picture, to see how the bit that they are concerned about fits in with that, and make it work for them (Agency 7).

Knowledge of the bigger picture often comes out of an academic background, and participants identified a range of academic skills and knowledge that should be possessed by good early childhood/family community workers. Academic knowledge in relation to community work included:

- attachment and theories of child and adult development, the importance of the early years (Graduates 1, 5, 15, Agencies 3, 5)
- mental health (Graduate 15, Agency 2)
- family dynamics/ working with children and families (Graduates 1, 7, 14, Agency 8)
- social disadvantage and social issues, prejudice and anti-bias (Graduates 8, 13)
- community development (Graduates 5, 10)
- empowerment and difference, social role valorisation/normalisation (Graduate 8)
- crisis intervention and conflict management (Agencies 2, 9)
- counselling knowledge (Agency 8)
- culture (Agency 3)
- advocacy (Agency 2)
- working with addictions (Agency 2)
- family violence (Agency 2)
- para-legal knowledge (Agency 2).

In addition, participants identified that one aspect of early childhood/family community work includes how
to write submissions and reports (Graduates 2, 9, 11), and that such activities required some formal academic skills, including:

- undertaking research—finding information (Graduates 2, 6, 7, Agencies 7, 8): ‘... knowledge of surveys and questionnaires … evaluation is useful in providing reports to funding bodies and part of it is also linked to accreditations and meeting standards’ (Agency 8)
- presenting that research in written form (Graduates 6, 8, 9, Agency 8): ‘... referencing and writing essays is a skill I have had to use for my projects’ (Graduate 8)
- writing policy (Agency 8)
- computer literacy skills (Graduate 2).

These academic skills can be translated into management/administration and leadership roles. Early childhood/family community workers in management/supervisory roles need to ‘... know about the administrative side. They should be able to see themselves as a leader in ... to be confident about it. What does leadership look and feel like?’ (Graduate 5). This includes a range of tasks, such as supervision of staff (Graduate 5, Agency 8), meetings (Agencies 1, 7) and record keeping (Agency 1).

Participants offered a general vision of the future:

The next five to 10 years we are entering a difficult time but with that there are opportunities to do things differently. I do think that this sector is too used to looking to other people and other sectors to do the leadership. We do not believe in ourselves, we are not training ourselves to find the answers and to put them out there and to be leaders. We have built business paradigms around governance. This is a female sector, we do women’s work from a feminist perspective and we are not taking this into consideration when we are looking at the solutions. We are constantly trying to adapt our solutions to fit ... We are still in the process of listening and engaging and creating spaces for people to talk and letting the consumers set the answers and to work with that type of model, rather than government or business to set the policy framework (Agency 7).

In following this idea of creating new, reflective early childhood/family community workers who take on a role in shaping a new world, the participant from Agency 7 suggested that training was a key factor:

The temptation is that training will teach people to be good managers. And, it will be pragmatic, realistic and will teach people the skills that prepare them for the real world. That’s the danger. I think the community sector needs leaders, prepared to talk different narratives and point to things that don’t fit.

Be able to listen to the heartbeat of the community, make sense of it and voice it. Teach people to be leaders and companions rather than manage widgets and bits that make the system work. I think the sector is crying out for leaders and the temptation for training is to go for what is suitable and measurable. I think the university has be a leader in this and has to engage with organisations that are prepared to talk about this. That they will be turning out students that will be asking questions and not students that want to give an answer before they even finish listening to the question (Agency 7).

What does this mean for training?

Our early childhood/family workers of the future will need a different toolkit of skills and knowledge than those currently provided in many courses and universities around the country if they are to succeed in driving change and creating a new world of high-quality services for young children and their families. I propose a model whereby early childhood/family workers receive a common core, consisting of attitudes, knowledge and skills around community work/early childhood and family work. We may even choose to call our new professionals ‘early childhood/family pedagogues’ in a similar manner to the Danish model (Oberhuemer, 1998), rather than early childhood teachers. In addition to the common core referred to above, workers then choose a specialisation that will enable them to focus on different aspects of the work—for example, teaching, management, counselling, parent education and support, addictions, multicultural and/or Indigenous service delivery. Specialists may have particular titles—for example, undertaking additional study in teaching would result in a qualification for ‘early childhood teachers’ as in Norway (Rhedding-Jones, 2005). Thus, we will create a team of early childhood/family workers, each with different knowledge and skills (but sharing an underlying philosophy and core understandings), who together can offer a holistic, wraparound service to the children, families and communities with whom they work.

We could have clear training pathways that enable students to have flexibility and choice, while operating to improve overall workforce skills and knowledge. For example, we could continue to offer relevant vocational education and training (VET) diplomas focusing on the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in work under the supervision of more highly trained staff. These professionals would work directly with children (for example, in long day care, playgroups) and in some family programs. For example, they might assist with family support groups etc. but would not undertake roles requiring sole and complex responsibility (for example, they would not undertake home visits with families identified as at risk). These graduates would be offered
advanced standing into a three-year degree program—I am suggesting the title Bachelor of Early Childhood and Family Pedagogy. The three-year degree would focus on the common core of child/family/community work. Graduates would have sufficient skills and knowledge to offer direct services (to be in charge of a group in child care, undertake home visits, run support groups etc.) and to manage programs (for example, child care coordinator, a home-visiting program supervisor). In the fourth year of their degree, students would choose a specialisation. Students may specialise in early childhood education, which would enable them to be responsible for programs transitioning children into school, and for the early years of schooling (early childhood teachers). Alternatively, students may specialise in management, which would give them the necessary skills and knowledge to manage more complex services (such as managing an early childhood hub with its multiplicity of reporting responsibilities). They may specialise in family counselling or child protection, which would give them the ability to work with complex family issues and/or issues around abuse and neglect.

In addition to this new framework for pre-service training, we will need to consider how we might best support those already working in the field to upskill. Clearly existing technical and further education (TAFE) graduates can follow the suggested pathway into a three- and four-year degree. Those already with degrees will need to have a range of graduate training programs available to them. There is considerable value, for example, in offering a graduate program in the material offered in the common core of the three-year undergraduate degree. This would enable existing graduates from a range of other disciplines (for example, nursing, counselling, addiction studies, Indigenous studies) to come to share the underlying philosophy, skills and knowledge required in child/family/community work. Other graduate programs may parallel the specialisations offered in the fourth year of the undergraduate degree, enabling graduates to become multiskilled.

Conclusion

I believe that we need to make significant changes to the way we currently prepare professionals to work in the new world of early childhood/family services if we want to achieve the degree of improvements in outcomes the literature promises may be possible. We cannot simply add more to existing courses; my experiences indicate that existing courses are already over-full and the addition of more material only detracts from the learning possible—encouraging, in my opinion, surface rather than in-depth learning. If we are going to adequately prepare professionals for the future, we need to dramatically change our courses. We have to change the way we think about our field and the workers who will succeed there in the future. It is an exciting challenge and I look forward to a vigorous debate as we move together into the world of tomorrow.

References


Gender and leadership styles in children’s play

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THIS ARTICLE COMPARES AND CONTRASTS the leadership styles evident in children’s spontaneous collaborative play in two early childhood settings. The first site, in 2007, was a long day care centre and involved 22 three- and four-year-old children. The second site, in 2008, was the morning session of a kindergarten and involved 47 children.

A strong factor in beginning and maintaining a play episode was the leadership role of individual children. There were clear gender differences in leadership style. Two key roles were those of dictator and director. The dictator was invariably male and more autocratic and less able or likely to resolve inter-group conflict. The director, on the other hand, was usually female and had a more democratic approach to conflict and was more ready to compromise to keep the play episode going. Mixed-gender play was more prevalent in the long day care centre and allowed boys to experience leadership roles and styles not normally available in boys-only play.

Introduction

Young children’s leadership is an under-theorised and under-researched topic (Lee, Recchia & Shin, 2005). Much of the research literature involves paired children working on adult-set tasks that are aimed to provide data on specific aspects of children’s collaborative work (for example, Fawcett & Garton, 2005; Murphy & Faulkner, 2006).

Lee et al. (2005) discuss the importance of relational and contextual elements to explain both styles of leadership and the nature of other children’s interactions. In their study of four children (three girls, one boy) aged between 40 and 56 months who had been identified as leaders by their teachers, they identified four leadership styles: the ‘director’, the ‘free spirit,’ the ‘manager’ and the ‘power man’. In their study, a clear gender difference in leadership style was evident. The boy (‘power man’) was much more overtly subversive of the teachers’ expected standards of behaviour and this constant challenging of the limits was an important reason for his popularity. Related research (Mullarkey, Recchia, Lee, Shin & Lee, 2006) offered insight into the relationship between young leaders and educators.

Ghafouri and Wien (2005) identified four kinds of social literacy that frequently and successfully sustained play in their study. These were leading and following the roles in play; supporting emotional wellbeing among the participants; collaborating by including others in play by sharing or adding props; and conflict resolution skills, both among participants and between participants and intruders. They found that leadership and power negotiation are important in both developing and sustaining play.

Gender-focused research has provided some insights into the nature of leadership in children’s play. Girls use indirect demands, polite requests and persuasion to influence their partner’s behaviour, while boys rely on direct demands, commands, threats, physical force, and a greater use of statements that express their personal desires and assert leadership (Neppi & Murray, 1997). The research of Cook, Fritz, McCornack and Visperas (1985) indicated that males made greater use of statements that expressed their personal desires and asserted leadership. They found that males also made greater use of lecturing or teaching/directing statements. Girls’ communication contains more collaborative speech than that of boys, while that of the boys contains more controlling speech (Murphy & Faulkner, 2006). Girls were also found to demonstrate more elaboration of peers’ proposals and more responsibility and mutual coordination (Sluss & Stremmel, 2004).

Research on cooperation and collaboration in play episodes also offered some explanation of the leadership gender differences. Black and Hazen (1990) found that girls were more likely to join in the activity of playmates and that the play was more likely to involve
cooperative, cohesive turn-taking. On the other hand, boys were more likely to pursue their own ideas for play. Boys’ play was also more likely to be characterised by abrupt shifts of topic, repeated reorganisation of play episodes and, in general, more dispersive social interaction.

Differences in the nature of gendered social interactions have also been noted. Neppi and Murray (1997) found that, in social play, girls’ play was cooperative, usually organised in non-competitive ways, and constructive in nature. On the other hand, they found that boys played in larger, more hierarchically organised groups and that status within the group was manipulated in their interactions with their peers.

This article reports on a research project that investigated the nature of independent, collaborative play in two different early education centres. One focus of the study was the leadership styles adopted by the children.

Methods

The overarching purpose of these interpretivist (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) case studies was to investigate the nature of collaborative play between young children in early childhood education settings. Case study research involves the study of an issue within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The first site, in 2007, was an all-day long day care centre and involved 22 three- and four-year-old children. The second site, in 2008, was the morning session of a kindergarten and involved 47 four-year-old children. Because of the diversity of early childhood education settings, the findings can only be regarded as reflecting children’s play within these Auckland, New Zealand, early childhood centres. However, it is probable that the discussion may have some resonances with many early childhood educators.

In both cases I spent one morning a week from the beginning of March until the end of November in the early childhood settings. I decided to identify play as collaborative when two or more children were involved in an episode in which there was a common understanding of the scenario and joint interest and action to maintain and develop it. This decision was informed by Shim, Herwig and Shelley’s (2001, p. 154) modification of the nested Parten-Smilansky play scale and Broadhead’s characteristics of cooperative play (Broadhead, 2004, p. 49).

As I wanted to concentrate on independent collaborative play, my role was purely as an observer. In keeping with this I did not record any collaborative play episodes occurring around activities the teachers had set up, and I stopped recording any episode whenever a teacher intervened in the play. During 2007, 85 episodes were observed in the all-day long day care centre. During 2008, 69 episodes were observed in the sessional public kindergarten. The episodes were documented using a mix of field notes, videotape and audiotape recordings, and digital photographs. Not all episodes that occurred were recorded. While observing inside I could not monitor play that was occurring in the outside area, and the reverse also was true. Where two episodes were occurring simultaneously in the same setting, normally the episode involving the more complex themes and interactions was more closely observed, and the other episode monitored to record the main themes and direction of the play.

Sample and setting

The research took place in two Auckland early childhood settings. Although geographically separate within Auckland City, they were very similar with regard to the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the children and the qualifications and teaching experience of the three staff responsible for the children at each centre. The long day care setting was open from 7.30 am until 6.00 pm and catered for children from six months up to five years of age. The research involved the three- and four-year-old group. Over the year, the number of child participants varied. Initially there were 15 children (six girls, nine boys) in the group. During the year, three children left to go to school, and six children moved up into this group from a younger age group within the centre. In November, there were 18 children in the group (eight girls, 10 boys).

The kindergarten was sessional, with a group of 45 four-year-old children who attended five mornings a week, and a group of 45 three-year olds who attended for three afternoons. The research involved the morning group. There were originally 35 children (23 girls, 12 boys) in the participant group. During the year, 25 children left the group and 18 children entered it. By November, the participant group consisted of 28 children (16 girls, 12 boys). The children in both settings were predominantly of New Zealand European ethnic background from middle-class families.

Analysis

My interest in and definition of leadership developed as I observed the children’s collaborative play. It soon became evident that there were individual children within ongoing play groupings who assumed a dominant role in initiating the play, assigning roles within the play, and controlling the direction that the play episode took. I therefore identified these children as leaders. Originally two of the categories (‘director’, ‘power man’), suggested by Lee et al. (2005) seemed to also be appropriate as general descriptors of the leadership styles I was observing. The girls’ leadership style was similar to that described by their term ‘director’ and I
adopted this term with the aim of adding further depth to their description. There was sufficient difference between the boys’ leadership style I was observing and Lee et al.’s description of the boy in their study as the ‘power man’ for me to need to find a term which better encapsulated the leadership style I was recording. It was only midway during the second year of the research project that I decided that the term ‘dictator’ best described the behaviours I was observing.

All field notes, audiotapes and videotapes were transcribed and the 154 episodes over the two settings yielded a considerable amount of data for analysis. Originally, analysis was done using categories of gender, theme, type, play area (for example, blocks, home area). Other categories emerged from analysis of the data itself. Examples of these were leadership roles, friendship groupings, and gendered variations in the amount and nature of spoken language used in play episodes.

A gender-based analysis of the data was undertaken. Three categories were used—boy, girl and mixed-gender play. Each episode from which the data was taken was identified using an eight-digit code. The first two digits represent the day, the second two the month, the next two the year, and the last two the number of the episode. For example, 08/03/07.04 represents the fourth episode that was observed on 8 March 2007. The research had ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms were used for all child participants.

**Findings and discussion**

Apart from seven children who consistently preferred to play and work by themselves, joint play was the common pattern of play for all other 62 children in the study. Friendship was the key factor in determining with whom children played, and the nature of the play. Most of these joint play episodes were of a social nature involving parallel play, and regular collaborative play was confined to a small group within both settings. The crucial element underpinning collaborative play seemed to be the existence of a leader within the girls’ friendship group or the boys’ interest-based group.

The findings are presented in the form of vignettes from episodes involving those groups of children who most often were involved in collaborative play. Within each setting there was quite a marked difference in the amount of collaborative play undertaken by individual children and the involvement of a recognised leader seemed to be an important factor in this.

The most significant difference between the play in the two settings was the much greater incidence of mixed-gender play in the long day care centre. The narratives are reported separately for each of the settings, so that any impact the setting may have had can be identified.

In the kindergarten, there were four clear social groupings (two dyads of boys and two dyads of girls) that consistently were involved in collaborative play when the data collection began early in March. During the year, as children left the group to go to school and new children came in to replace them, both the boys’ and girls’ groups coalesced to form larger collaborative play groups. As membership changed and the groups came together, leadership and control patterns changed within the group.

Unlike the kindergarten, there were no fixed groupings of boys’ collaborative play groups in the long day care centre. The boys’ groupings depended more on particular interests on the day than on friendship ties. Two boys, however, did tend to assume leadership and control when involved in collaborative play. John had a dictatorial leadership style, while Colin had a more directorial style. Colin was more able than any other boy in the group to move into and be accepted into girls’ play. There was a group of three girls (Clare, Meg, Jenny) who consistently played together. They provided a core group that several other children moved in and out of from episode to episode. The play was invariably of a sociocultural nature, with a focus on domestic relationships and enactments of school life. The three had different leadership styles and control of the play varied, depending on the theme.

**Boys’ collaborative play**

In both settings there was a very hierarchical structure to the boys’ collaborative play, with the dominant boy using a very dictatorial approach to maintain his control.
of the play scenario. Control was established through a mixture of aggression and intimidation. Leaders tended to be bigger and more aggressively oriented than the other boys. The use of a loud voice, repeated demands, exclusion from the play episode, standing over the others, and—if need be—physical struggle were the common elements of this style of leadership.

One boy, John, was the uncontested leader of the boys’ play during the year in the long day care centre. The membership of the play group varied from episode to episode, and friendship was not an important element in this; the action and plot being more significant in attracting participants. John relied on his size and physical presence to assume control of any collaborative play episode he was involved in. It was rare for other boys to challenge his domination of the play script or of his right to have the policeman’s hat and coat or builder’s helmet and jacket when playing games with those roles in them. John was always the driver or the captain, whether in a boat or in the police car (10/05/07.26). John tended to direct the play using gesture rather than words, and a feature of the collaborative play episodes he was involved in were the long silences while the boys worked together on a common task. They would continually look back to him for assurance that they were on task. His decision on whether other children could join the play was always the binding one. It was rare for him to get involved in mixed-gender play but, when this occurred, it was normally with Clare who was able to direct John’s involvement in subtle ways that did not challenge his need to assert his position of primacy. She would build ‘men’s work’ into the scenario and give him the freedom to move in and out of role.

In the kindergarten, where there was a much greater movement in and out of the group, leadership was always an area of contestation. In March, two pairs of boys (Barry and Henry, Peter and James) tended to play with each other for the whole of the morning session, between the end of mat time and the beginning of clean-up time. At times, they would drift off to other activities or allow other children into their play, but essentially they were self-contained units. At this stage of the year Henry and Barry would, at times, move into the play of Peter and James, but the reverse did not occur. The social dynamics within each pair of boys were quite different. James was the accepted leader of his pair but leadership and control of the play was nearly always a contested zone with Barry and Henry. Rejection of the play situation was a common strategy used when this occurred.

When working with other children, both Barry and Henry were prone to respond to challenges to their leadership with some act of physical force. When Nathan objected to what Henry was doing while playing together in the home corner, Henry’s reaction was to twist Nathan’s arms (27/03/08.04). Barry was one of the biggest boys in the kindergarten, and he had a minor speech impediment that often made it difficult to understand what he was saying. He would frequently resort to physical action, apparently in frustration, when he couldn’t get his point across. While this would usually lead to the end of the play episode, it did serve to reinforce his position within the hierarchy.

Barry and Henry would often use exclusion of other children as a way to emphasise their leadership and control. On one occasion they were in the sandpit making poisoned wombat stew when Terry came over. The following exchange took place:

- Terry: Can I help?
- Henry: No!!
- Terry: Can I?
- Henry: I’m in charge.
- Barry: No, we’re in charge of our one, we’re in charge of our one. You’re not allowed over (04/04/08.08).

James and Peter spent virtually all their time at kindergarten in the sandpit. They had a number of common themes to their play and did not talk very much as they worked together. James would often let Peter orchestrate the scenario and their play was marked by very little conflict. When playing with other children in the sandpit, both were content to share leadership and control of the play with others. On one occasion, James and Peter were involved in a very complex scenario focused around policemen and firemen with Mary and Barry. The play episode lasted for 57 minutes and during that time Mary, Peter and James offered suggestions to maintain and develop the scenario that were accepted without question by all the other children. However, when Henry joined in the play, he instigated a physical conflict over possession of a seat in the police car and then of the rope to tie up the baddies, as he sought to establish his place in the play hierarchy (08/05/08.14).

The close friendship of James and Peter was threatened in early April by the arrival of Fred in the morning session of kindergarten. James and Fred had been close friends in the afternoon session and Fred quickly moved into the group. This changed the dynamics quite dramatically as Peter and Fred competed for James’s attention. James now became the dominant person in the play, assigning roles and determining the script. Fred entered the morning session on 11 April, and by the end of May, Peter left the group and the sandpit and was looking for new playmates inside. Although James made an effort to revive the friendship, saying to Peter on 20 June, ‘Excuse me Peter, I do want to
be your friend’ (20/06/08.32), the friendship and joint involvement in collaborative play was not fully re-established before Peter left for school at the beginning of July. No longer needing to compete with Peter for James’s friendship, Fred was able to become more assertive. As time passed, Fred became the dominant partner, first with James and later with the wider group of boys.

The assertion of Fred’s leadership in his play with James was not uncontested, and was normally associated with possession of objects associated with the play. In these disputes increasingly Fred came to be the winner.

After Henry went to school towards the end of June, Barry started to become a regular member of James and Fred’s play episodes. Barry was not predisposed to accept Fred’s leadership and take a subordinate role in the group play. The battle for power commenced the first week after Henry’s departure when Fred, James, Andrew, Peter and Barry were in the sandpit. Fred, James, Andrew and Peter had dug a hole looking for treasure and Barry had dug another close by. A joint leadership of the large group had been established, with Andrew saying to James, ‘You’re doing all the right stuff. And me and you and Fred are all in charge’. Fred came back with some water and Barry attempted to gain some leadership and control of the play by first saying, ‘Look at my hole, he brings water to me too’. When that failed, he tried to change the direction of the play saying, ‘We can put the poo in there’ and putting liquid sand into James and Fred’s hole. Andrew rejected this change of theme responding with, ‘We was making poo last week’.

Barry tried another approach saying, ‘Join them together’, referring to the two holes they had dug. Fred responded to Barry’s leadership challenge by introducing a new theme, ‘We’re going to poison all the people in the lake’. Barry persevered with his idea; ‘We’re making poo, not poison’. Faced with this continuing challenge, James and Fred left the sandpit and started playing at the water trough, leaving Barry to direct Andrew and Peter in the sandpit (04/07/08.35). At this stage, both Barry and Fred could claim some allegiance within the boys’ group.

The competition between Barry and Fred for prime leadership in the wider group of boys continued for a couple of months. It was characterised by heated arguments, conflict over possession of play artefacts and attempts to exclude the other from the play. However, they would always unite to prevent other children attempting to direct the play. The paramount leadership of Fred in the eyes of the other boys was clearly established by the beginning of October. This is clearly illustrated by incidents within a play episode in the sandpit. A group of six boys were digging a waterfall in the sandpit. Luke was about to pour water into the hole but Carlos stopped him, saying, ‘Don’t pour it in the hole until Fred comes’. The boys moved away from the hole and two girls took possession of it. Some time later, Carlos came back and saw the girls digging in the hole and the following conversation took place:

Carlos: *Stop that, that’s Fred’s hole.*

Elizabeth: *We’re making it deeper so the baddies will fall in.*

Carlos: *That will make Fred angry, and he goes back inside to tell Fred what is happening to the hole.*

Elizabeth: *We’re going to keep digging, we’re going to.*

Alf comes out with Carlos and says: *Stop digging the hole, Fred will be really angry.*

Carlos: *Yeah, we told him.*

Alf: *He will be very angry and he will push you in the hole* (26/09/08.56).

**Girls’ collaborative play**

In both settings, girls’ collaborative play was characterised by cooperation and leadership. It was exercised in a more benign and directorial manner than was the case with the boys’ play. There was more conflict within the dominant threesome in the long day care centre than among the pairs in the kindergarten. This was due to there being two competing leaders among the three, and a two-on-one situation would sometimes eventuate when two competing scenarios were being advanced.

In the kindergarten, initially there were two pairs of girls (Wendy and Pat, Sarah and April) who regularly played together. Two other girls May (April’s twin sister) and Susan sometimes were also part of the play of both groups. Wendy’s and Pat’s play was closely associated with the home corner and family play, and nearly all their play episodes began there before extending the scenario into the wider kindergarten setting. Sarah’s and April’s play tended to have a literacy or fantasy theme. In both these dyads the leadership of one girl (Sarah and Wendy) was clearly recognised by the other friend and, when conflict arose, a negotiated solution was normally attempted and achieved by these leaders. The leadership was based on Sarah’s and Wendy’s creativity in setting up and developing interesting scenarios for the play. Sarah and Wendy also had better developed fine motor skills than April and Pat and they would often provide help in making things. Sarah and April had made cars out of cardboard boxes, and, when April’s broke, she brought it to Sarah to fix (18/04/08.13).

Developments within a scenario were normally couched in terms of a suggestion and a positive response. Sarah, April and Flora had a family role-
playing game that moved into pretending to be a train and chugging around the kindergarten. As the train was moving along, Sarah said, ‘Let’s play hospitals’. Flora responded, ‘Yes, let’s play hospitals’ and the three girls quickly moved into a scenario with nurses and patients in the hospital (04/04/08.07).

A typical example of this accepted power and leadership in the girls’ relationship can be seen in this episode involving Sarah, April and May. Sarah had established her own and April’s roles as sisters and proceeded to give May her role:

Sarah to May: You’re the baby.

May: I’m the cat.

Sarah: No, you have to be the baby. May proceeded to pretend to be sucking on a bottle of milk.

Sarah then said: April, pretend you’re in the fairy dress and you can blow out the candles.

April: I’m just excited about the cake.

Sarah: We’re going to have party games; first we will play statues.

Sarah then said to May and April: Do you want to come to the play school with me?

As they walked out the door, Sarah showed April how to dance, saying: Put your hands on your hips—skip, skip, skip, as she demonstrated the steps.

April: Now we’re big sisters.

Sarah: You sit down because I’m going to be the teacher, and she showed April a book and began to read it to her (01/08/08.38).

The dominant leadership role of Wendy is evident in the following block area interaction with Pat. Wendy and Pat moved to the block corner and started to build a tower-like construction. Wendy said, ‘It’s done, it’s done, Pat’ and used her hand to stop Pat from putting more blocks on the tower. Then Wendy said, ‘We need more blocks’ and Pat put another block on the tower. The two girls continued to build up the tower. As Pat put each block on top she looked to Wendy as if for approval. Wendy said, ‘We need more, we need more of those’, pointing to the small blocks they had been standing on end. She followed this with, ‘Start making the side bits’, indicating that enclosures should be made for the plastic animals that were lying on the floor in the block corner. As the play continued, Wendy continued to direct the building and created a story involving dinosaurs, elephants and sharks to provide a purpose for the construction (07/08/08.43).

At the end of May, the two groups of girls slowly began to coalesce. This was only an occasional event at this time, but by September their play together was an established practice. From the beginning there was an acceptance of joint leadership. Rather than competing for leadership, Wendy and Sarah worked harmoniously together to direct the play of the enlarged group. Both offered suggestions for roles and for themes and it was rare for one of them to challenge or refuse to accept the suggestion of the other. Each recognised the other’s particular strength, whether it was Sarah’s ability to make crowns (12/09/08.51) or Wendy’s expertise in organising and directing family and cooking scenarios in the sandpit (12/09/08.52).

In the long day care centre there was a group of three girls (Clare, Meg, Jenny) who consistently played together. Within the three, there were conflicting leadership styles and control of the play fluctuated among the three girls, depending on the situation. Meg was more inclined to want to dominate the play. She would move out of the play, often saying, ‘I don’t want to play this anymore’ if she did not get her way. Clare was more inclined to direct the play and to compromise to keep Meg within the play episode. Clare was usually the person who allocated the roles within play episodes she was involved in. Jenny had a much more complex leadership style, moving from a dictatorial to a directorial approach from episode to episode. Jenny also was the girl most able and prone to move into boys’ play. Just as Colin could take over and direct girls’ play, so Jenny was able to do this with the boys. This was due to her ability to bring new and interesting scenarios into the play, such as ‘Pretend I’m dead, eh’ (Mawson, 2008). The girls’ play was often punctuated by short-term conflict which was usually quickly resolved. If resolution was not achieved, then this generally led to the withdrawal of one of them from the play.

Instances of Meg’s dominant style and Clare’s conciliatory style can be seen in one block corner episode involving them. Within a two-minute period Meg responded to Clare’s refusal to put a block where she had told her with, ‘No, we don’t. I’m not your friend anymore’ and Clare responded to Meg’s removal of the blocks with, ‘I’m going to make a birthday cake and you can’t have it. You’re not coming to my birthday’. Nevertheless, they continued to play cooperatively together for another 12 minutes until Clare dropped to the floor, rolled on her back and said to Meg, ‘I’m pretending, I’m not going to play’ and laughed. Meg walked away and then turned and said, ‘Don’t say that. Okay, bye’, and turned and left the space. Clare ran after her calling, ‘Hey, Meg’ (08/03/07.04).

Clare normally acted as mediator in these disputes, often suggesting new play themes to take the focus off the original cause of conflict. During a cooking scenario in the sandpit, Jenny and Meg had a disagreement that led Jenny to sit in the sandpit, refusing to play with or look at the other two. Clare went over, bent right over...
to look her in the eyes and said ‘Darling’ and offered Jenny her hands to pull her up. When Jenny refused to relent, Clare introduced a new idea, ‘School time, school time’ and Jenny decided to join in the new scenario (08/03/07:05).

Maintaining the friendship was an important purpose of the group and others within the threesome would also act as mediators if Clare was one of disputants. One morning Jenny, Clare and Meg were all painting at the easel. They had been enjoying social chat about going to the dentist and doctor and ‘not being hurt’ but ‘being brave’. Then a dispute developed between Jenny and Clare over the use of the paint and the following exchange occurred:

Jenny: Would you be my friend, Meg?
Clare: She’s not anymore.
Meg: You can be our friend, what about we be all friends, we can be three friends.
Jenny: Can you help me paint my painting, you’re helping me with my painting aren’t you?
Meg: Yes.
Meg: Can I put some circle white on it?
Jenny: You can be our friend, what about we be all friends, we can be three friends.

Leadership in mixed-gender play

There was a clear difference in the amount of mixed-gender collaborative play in the two settings. Mixed-gender play involved nearly one-third of the episodes in the long day care centre (26/85), but less than one-eighth (8/69 in the kindergarten. Three of these kindergarten episodes evolved as a result of boys’ aggressive intervention to disrupt girls’ play in the sandpit. In all three cases, the girls were able to resist the boys’ efforts to drive them from the sandpit by providing a new and interesting scenario that drew the boys into their play. This aggression/redirection process did not occur in the long day care centre.

In the first half of the year in the kindergarten, there was little mixed-gender collaborative play. An element of mixed-gender collaborative play emerged as a group of children entered the morning session at the beginning of July. The key element was the leadership of one girl, Carol, who became the recognised leader in a number of collaborative episodes that normally involved a number of boys. It was very unusual for another girl to be involved in the play. Her core group included four boys, two of whom, John and Allen, were normally involved in active play involving guns and goodies and baddies. When playing under Carol’s direction, however, they were happy to take part in quite different domestic-type play. Examples of this type of play were cooking in the sandpit (field note 29/8/08), water play (field note 19/09/08), dramatic play as office workers (17/10/08:59) and preparing and going on a picnic (31/10/08:64). In each of these cases, Carol set the scenario and allocated the roles and her leadership was never questioned by any of the boys.

The picnic episode is a good example of Carol’s leadership. She allocated the roles and actions of the boys, ‘And you two boys have to carry the basket together because it’s very heavy. Yes all of you boys, John, Steve and Allen have to carry the basket because it is heavy. Everybody, plates, everybody gets some plates, let’s see, that should be enough. Now a bowl, we need one each’. John was allowed to bring his gun to the picnic, and, while Carol changed the baby, Steve, who had been given the role of the father said ‘This is the phone for daddy, it’s my work’ and he took a phone out of the basket and pretended to talk on it. John also picked up a phone and started a conversation, ‘I need to ... one, one, hello fire engine’ (31/10/08:64).

Carol already had a strong friendship relationship with her main playmate, Steve, that had developed socially outside the kindergarten. There was no strong friendship link with the other three boys before moving into the morning session, and Carol’s leadership was based both on an ability to communicate with them in a manner that was firm without being overly dictatorial, and through her ability to incorporate roles and actions that allowed the boys to pursue their own interests within the framework of the play scenario.

In the long day care centre, mixed-gender collaborative play was almost always initiated either by Jenny, Meg, or Clare. Mixed-gender scenarios tended to revolve around three themes; ‘monsters’, ‘doctors and hospitals’ and ‘family and pets’. While Meg and Clare were adept at bringing boys into their play, Jenny, who could adopt either a dictatorial or directorial role, was also able to move into boys’ play and take control of the scenario and widen the number of participants in the episode.

One of the boys also had this ability. Colin was able to move into other children’s play episodes and change the direction of play without causing conflict in the
process. When he moved into a performing animals scenario being acted out by Jenny and James, he soon transformed the play into a much more dramatic scenario involving vampire bats, King Kong, and hospitals (01/03/07:01). On another occasion Meg, Clare, Jenny and Ada were involved in a family and school scenario. Colin arrived holding a large syringe and the play quickly turned into a monsters, doctors and being dead scenario into which two other boys and another girl entered (15/03/07:07). Similarly, a group of girls were involved in a family scenario when Colin arrived on the scene. He immediately entered the play announcing, ‘I’m going to be the dad’ and within two minutes had introduced a car into the play and was walking round the centre with the girl passengers following him (05/04/07:15).

Conclusion

Children’s leadership styles in early childhood settings are an under-theorised and under-researched area (Lee et al., 2005). This research has cast some light on this very complex question. Friendship ties were the most important element in defining the play group for girls. For the boys, particularly in the long day care centre, the action and plot were more important in the emergence of a collaborative play episode. In both settings, control of non-core members wishing to join the play was strongly policed, and ‘outsiders’ could never be sure whether their overtures to join in the play would be accepted.

Within both settings there were clear gender differences regarding leadership and control in collaborative play. Within boys-only play, leadership was invariably dictatorial in style with a clear hierarchical status among the participants. Leadership was asserted in a number of ways. One was to speak in a loud authoritative voice, issuing demands rather than requests (Neppi & Murray, 1997) and to maintain this until opposition was silenced. This was often accompanied by standing up to assume a dominant posture over the rest of the group. Very rarely did they take physical action against another boy, and this was normally seen within the group as an unacceptable use of power, ending the collaborative play that had been occurring. A second technique was to exclude other children from joining the play, or prevent them from taking some action within the play experience. Some boys, such as Colin, Peter and James, were able to act in a directorial manner but this was usually related to episodes of mixed-gender play.

In both settings, the leadership style in girls’ collaborative play was invariably directorial. Leadership within a play episode was rarely contested. Conflict was usually related to negotiation over the allocation of roles or the development of the scenario and was soon resolved, either by incorporating the cause of the dispute into the existing scenario, or re-directing the play into a new scenario that the entire group felt happy with. Individual strengths were recognised and respected and consensus and compromise were important elements of successful leaders. In situations where the differing strengths of recognised leaders were complementary, the leadership would be shared between them. There was significantly more talk in girls’ play than in the boys’ play, in line with the findings of Murphy and Faulkner (2006).

It was only in the area of mixed-gender play that clear differences emerged between the two settings. This type of play was both more prevalent and more invitational in the long day care centre. In the kindergarten, not only was mixed-gender play much less common, but nearly half the observed episodes began with boys attempting to disrupt the girls’ play. However, in both settings, involvement in mixed-gender play allowed boys to experience leadership roles and styles that were not often available to them in boys-only play. There was also a greater use of talk by boys in mixed-gender play episodes. There would seem to be real social and language advantages for boys who become involved in this type of play.

The key to this different level of involvement in mixed-gender play may be related to the different nature of the settings and the length of the children’s interactions within them. The group within the long day care centre was less than half the size of the kindergarten group (18:45) and they were together for at least seven hours every day, compared with the three hours per day for the kindergarten children. Most of the children in the long day care centre had also been attending the centre for a number of years so that a strong friendship group had developed, with little change of membership. There was a large turnover of the children in the kindergarten setting during the year. This, combined with the size of the group and the much greater space and freedom to move from inside to outside play, resulted in a much less cohesive group.

The children in the long day care centre worked for most of the day within a space created by combining two rooms in an old villa. They had access to a small outside deck, but the outdoor play area was at the other end of the house, and their access was limited to set times. The boys and girls were therefore working in close proximity for much of the day, and this contributed to the greater interaction between them. The pedagogy and culture of the centre also was strongly influenced by the example of Reggio Emilia and this may have helped to create a strong group identity among the children.

In the kindergarten, the children had open access to a large indoor area and an expansive outdoor area. As a result, the girls tended to focus on indoor activities and the boys on outdoor activities, with little interaction between members of the other gender group. Play
episodes tended to be shorter and less complex than those in the long day care centre and this appeared to be related to the greater range of activities available to them and the ability to move freely about the whole kindergarten environment.

This research indicates that there are positive effects for boys who participate in mixed-gender play. The significant difference in the amount of mixed-gender play between the two early childhood sites appears to be related to environmental factors. The effect of space and available range of resources on children’s collaborative play seems to be worthy of further investigation.

References


Exploring engagement at ArtPlay: What factors influence the engagement of children and families in an artist-led community-based workshop?

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARTS to the creative, cultural and social development of children is increasingly acknowledged. In recognition of this, ArtPlay was established in 2005 by the City of Melbourne. Open to children aged three to 12 years, the facility provides a wide range of artist-led programs that serve a broad community, including parents and teachers. While institutions such as ArtPlay are emerging in response to a growing community demand, there has yet to be significant and sustained research into processes and outcomes of such organisations.

This paper reports on a three-year Australia Research Council-funded research project (2007–2009) that has been designed to identify, map and evidence the practices of ArtPlay in relation to engagement, learning and cultural citizenship. Through reference to the responses of children, families and artists to one key ArtPlay program, Pocketfool for preschoolers, this paper explores the question: What factors influence the engagement of children and families in an artist-led community-based workshop?

Introduction

ArtPlay is the first permanent home for children’s art and play in Australia and the facility makes an important non-school contribution to the artistic, creative and cultural development of the City of Melbourne as an aspiring United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) child-friendly city (City of Melbourne, 2005). Open to children aged three to 12 years, ArtPlay offers a wide range of artist-led programs and serves a broad community, including parents, carers, teachers and artists. Inspired by the successful community arts facility, The Ark, in Dublin (Drury, 2006), ArtPlay was opened in early 2004 as part of the City of Melbourne’s Strategic Plan (2004–2007) which aimed to promote the creative capacity of children through increased access and engagement in the arts. This goal is particularly important in a growing city like Melbourne, where the need for community and cultural activities in the city alone will increase as the child population rises; with predicted growth set to double, from 2760 in 2001 to 5362 by 2011 (City of Melbourne, 2005). Informed by changing demographics and re-framed policies, ArtPlay has established itself over five years as a key provider of artist-led arts and cultural experiences for children and families, both within the City of Melbourne and beyond. As part of this endeavour, ArtPlay has responded to a growing demand for early years arts programs targeted at children aged three to five years and their families.

Leading educationalists and social researchers (Brice Heath & Roach, 1999; Catterall, 2002; Costantoura, 2001; Deasy, 2002; Myers, 2003) have identified the importance of the arts to active and creative engagement in the social and cultural life of the community. There is also growing acknowledgement of the value of community-based arts programs for children and their families (Tayler, McArdle, Richer, Brennan & Weier, 2006). There is however, little available data providing close and detailed examination of how artists engage young children and families in arts experiences in community contexts. In response to this need, the University of Melbourne, in partnership with the City of Melbourne and the Australia Council for the Arts are undertaking an Australian Research Council-funded project entitled Mapping and augmenting engagement, learning and cultural citizenship for children through ArtPlay workshops with artists. Begun in 2007, the three-year project aims to: identify and provide evidence of children’s engagement; map what augments learning and cultural citizenship; and, informed by research findings, intervene to promote a culture of reflective practice that will support transformative and sustainable positive change.
Engaging arts programs for young children and families

The three-year national Education and the Arts Strategy (2004–2007) advocated that the arts not only improve the quality of learning for young children but ‘the quality of life itself in many variations—from the personal, to the family, community, to regional life, and to the life of the nation’ (Australia Council for the Arts, 2004, p. 1). A report commissioned by the Australia Council, entitled Australians and the arts, found that 85 per cent of those surveyed agreed that ‘the arts are an important part of the education of every Australian child’ and that 86 per cent would feel better about the arts if there were ‘better opportunities and education in the arts’ (Costantoura, 2001). While families acknowledge the benefit of the arts to their children, they can lack the opportunities, resources and skills to engage children in arts experiences. In response to this demand, facilities such as The Ark and ArtPlay have emerged. The successful development of these community arts programs indicates that artists may have a significant role to play in engaging children and families in arts and cultural experiences. Despite the significant research now being undertaken focusing on creative partnerships between schools and artists (Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999; Rich, 2005), little has been reported on how artists engage young children and families in out-of-school arts programs. One exception is the research into the innovative Australian Out of the Box Festival, run by the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. This research outlines how the development of a highly successful community arts program has required a ‘strong philosophical and curatorial framework combined with an explicit evaluation and development cycle … that builds capacity and impact as a provider for children’s aesthetic, cultural and artistic learning’ (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 8). Central to the development of this framework has been the concept of children as creative learners and cultural contributors and the view that family participation in, and value of, the arts impact on children’s engagement with the arts (Out of the Box, 2005). What this research does not articulate, in any depth, is the significant role of the artist in promoting child and family engagement in community-based arts programs.

There is currently considerable scholarly interest in the notion of ‘engagement’ in arts practice and the link between engagement and learning outcomes/achievement, yet this concept is rarely theorised, defined or explained. Literature on engagement largely focuses on school, higher education and workplace contexts, with many studies undertaken in the field of psychology. The authors of such work present multiple perspectives on engagement including behavioural, emotional and cognitive perspectives (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Russell, Ainley & Frydenberg, 2005). Behavioural engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) highlights the physical dimensions of participation that are identifiable through active involvement or ‘energy in action’ (Russell et al., 2005). Expressions of enjoyment, animation, humour, playfulness and satisfaction are linked to emotional engagement that involves positive and negative affective–motivational states (Steele & Fullagar, 2009) and the exhibition of a sense of pride (Wefald & Downey, 2009). Cognitive engagement is linked to expressions of concentration and curiosity and the investment of the person and thoughtfulness evident in their efforts to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60).

A summary of Australia Council-funded research undertaken in Australian schools, much of which involved artists, refers to young people’s engagement in terms of ‘flow’ or optimal experience and as an attitude, or way of seeing the world (Hunter, 2005). This interpretation resonates with the concept of flow articulated by Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1997) which refers to when a person becomes deeply immersed in a creative task and disassociated from their surroundings and an awareness of time (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000, p. 97). The concept of flow is linked to deep engagement. While gaining attention may involve little more than compliance, deep engagement involves the child seeing the relevance and meaning of the task and wanting to learn (Rowe et al., 2005). Aligned to this idea is the concept of ‘being in motion’ proposed by Ellsworth (2005), which refers to a deeply engaged state where mind and body, self and other become intertwined (Irwin & Springgay 2008, p. 108). Ellsworth’s theory points to wider conditions than the individual, such as the social and the environmental, that impact on deep engagement.

Research design

The design of the project included two phases. The first involved mapping 22 ArtPlay artist-led workshops that were representative of the diversity of ArtPlay programs offered in relation to participants, children’s age groups, art forms, workshop duration and types (Table 1). For each of these workshops, data collection included researcher observations, interviews with artists, parent/carer and child surveys and illustrative photographic documentation. Phase two of the study involved in-depth case study research of identified key ArtPlay programs. This research was conceptualised as an intervention, with the aim being to promote a culture of reflective practice amongst artists at ArtPlay. Five key programs were selected for a variety of reasons, including that they were popular, innovative, ongoing, involved multiple workshops, and were representative of particular ArtPlay program types. In this phase of the research, the approach to the study moved from a non-participant ethnographic study to the development of in-depth ‘case study stories’ (Simons, 2009), co-constructed from observations, artist interviews, artist reflective journals, child and parent/
This paper reports on one key program identified for further in-depth investigation—the early years program titled *Pocketfool for preschoolers*. Led by two experienced theatre/drama artists (two of the paper authors—Andersen and Wetherald; also referred to in this paper as ‘the artists’), this once-a-month program involves groups of up to 20 children aged two to five years and their parents/guardians in 45-minute active drama and play workshops. With reference to one of these, the *Transport workshop*, this paper explores which factors influence the engagement of children and families in an artist-led community-based workshop. A close examination of this ‘case study story’ provides a basis with which to interpret engagement in practice and develop a theoretical framework for further validation in relation to other ArtPlay programs.

**Pocketfool for preschoolers research**

A growing demand for preschool programs, combined with a strong commitment by the City of Melbourne to providing opportunities for young children and families, has led to an increase in the number of ArtPlay programs dedicated to children three to six years of age. With the intention of building capacity and ensuring high quality in this area, ArtPlay has supported a regular monthly public program, *Pocketfool for preschoolers*, which involves up to 40 participants comprising 20 three- to five-year-old children and their parents/guardians. While there is no requirement or recommendation for families to participate in multiple workshops, a group of return-user families has developed. Two of us (Andersen and Weatherald—also referred to in this report as ‘the artists’) have combined professional experience in theatre, drama and music and have performed for five years to groups of children in preschool settings. From our experience as both artists and parents, we identified a need for more high-quality drama workshops and ‘original theatre’ for young children (artist interview). The ArtPlay workshops have been the first opportunity for us, the two artists, to transform our performance skills into interactive workshops for preschool children.

Researching the *Pocketfool for preschoolers* program involved recorded meetings with the teaching artists, artist workshop reflections, dual research observations of two workshops, a child/parent survey and a parent focus-group meeting. A group blog was also established for artists and researchers to share their reflections on practice and future program design. The intention of the research was to uncover both characteristics of participant engagement and factors that impact on engagement. Observations undertaken by two researchers were coded and cross-checked for indicators of engagement and this analysis was contextualised, reinforced and contested by views expressed by artists, children and parents (survey and focus group).

The following descriptive narrative, created by the two artists, outlines the session observed. Set in the large hall-like open space at ArtPlay (Figure 1), the drama begins …

**The Transport workshop**

‘*Welcome aboard!*’ Dressed as train drivers, Jen and Heidi hand out large, child-drawn tickets and lead their passengers onto the ArtPlay Express—rows of large wooden blocks. With toots, chugs and cries of ‘All aboard!’ the train leaves the station. Everyone noisily joins in; they are soon leaning steeply from side to side as Jen and Heidi take the train around some very tight corners. There are tickets to be stamped and destinations to be confirmed: This train will have many stops, from Grandma’s house to Africa. Heidi asks …
the children what they can see out of the windows. One child can see a tiger. Soon there are many small tigers—all growling ferociously.

For the next half an hour, with ideas provided equally by the artists and the children, the train passengers become tigers and seagulls, row on the ocean and explore under sea, find treasure (which they draw), and escape from a shark on a rocket ship which becomes a magic carpet, on which they have a dance and a picnic ...

Sweet chime music comes from above. They look up and see a cloth-sculpture cloud coming down from the mezzanine level. Lying down, the group talks about what shapes they can see in the clouds and Heidi says, ‘Lie very still and you might be able to catch a cloud’. Jennifer drops white balloons from the mezzanine and the children catch them calmly. They throw and catch the clouds very gently with their adults while Jen plays chime music and sings a song about clouds.

The clouds are put aside and replaced by the train tickets and black felt pens. Each person draws the thing they most enjoyed doing during the session. Parents help scribe words for their children and/or draw a picture themselves. Jen and Heidi talk to people about their drawings. ‘I liked being a tiger!’ says one child. ‘So did I!’ ‘So did I!’ ‘I love tigers!’ There is a large number of tiger drawings. When everyone has finished, three families are invited to talk about their drawings. Most children want to take their tickets home, but a few are generously left with the artists. Everyone wants to take their cloud home.

**Interpreting engagement in practice**

The *Transport* workshop provides a valuable case study with which to consider what engages children and families in artist-led programs. Participant surveys collected following the workshop note high levels of engagement and satisfaction, both from children and parents with all 11 collected responses (*total number of child participants = 19*) indicating that the children enjoyed the workshop. Nine of the 11 respondents had participated in other ArtPlay workshops and thus were familiar with the environment. The highlights for the children, noted in survey responses, included the ‘tiger’, ‘magic carpet’, ‘balloons’, ‘fun of the train’, ‘drawing on the plastic’ and the excitement of the ‘bears coming out’. One parent noted how the workshop had ‘great energy, continued momentum, a sense of wonder, and encouraged creativity and imagination’. Not one of the respondents recommended any improvements to the ArtPlay program and two families asked for further sessions to accommodate unmet demand. These views are consistent with those given in the recorded focus-group meeting involving four families and their children, with respondents all indicating that they found the workshops very engaging, highlighting how the artists had quickly established a ‘relationship’ with the children, supported by a ‘secure’, ‘clean’ and ‘relaxed’ environment well suited to ‘informal’ and active play and imagination.

To guide the analysis of the participant engagement during the workshop, we were mindful of ‘involvement signals’ proposed by Chappell and Young (2007) which include participant language, facial expression and posture, reaction time, energy, persistence and precision. Taking these ‘signals’ into account, the researcher observation and artist reflections indicated that both the children and their parent/carers were highly engaged in the *Transport* workshop, as evidenced by curiosity and interest, emotional connection, active involvement and focused participation.

High levels of curiosity and interest are linked with experiences that balance opportunities for play and work where young people ‘feel both happy and energized, and they also feel that what they are doing is important’ (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000, p. 223). Such curiosity and interest were evident in both children and parents/carers immediately acting out the drama and through their self-motivation and readiness to transfer quickly from one activity to another without showing any signs of disengagement. Throughout the workshop, the artists were able to quickly attract and hold fast
the attention of both children and adults (Figure 2). A heightened emotional connection was demonstrated through the participants’ open, animated and enthusiastic body language, humorous expressions and playful interactions. These responses signalled characteristics of engagement, including a positive affective–motivational state, personal expressiveness (Steele & Fullagar, 2009) and the exhibition of a sense of pride (Wefald & Downey, 2009). Active involvement or ‘energy in action’ (Russell et al., 2005) and a ‘pervasive and persistent state of mind’ (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova & Bakker, 2002) was evident in all participants and sustained throughout most of the 50-minute workshop—a long time to maintain a three-year-old child on task.

Non-engagement can be considered evident when participants are unoccupied, waiting, staring, wandering, crying or displaying aggressive behaviour (McWilliam, Scarborough & Kim, 2003). There was only one clear example of non-engagement in the Transport workshop which involved one child that showed unease and unwillingness to participate. This initial hesitancy and uncertainty was overcome through some one-to-one artist support and the child actively participated throughout the rest of the workshop.

Deep engagement was noticeable in those experiences when children and parents/carers became engrossed in what they were doing; for example, drawing on a large sheet of clear plastic (Figure 3). Drawn to the task by the artist introduction to a ‘treasure box filled with coloured jewels’ (pencils), the captivated children demonstrated the characteristics of flow articulated by Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1997). This intrinsic motivation was evident in the children’s deep immersion and self-directed sustained participation in the workshop activity. The notion of deep engagement points to levels or layers of engagement. As noted in the Victorian Government school curriculum guidelines, ‘Engagement moves from a minimal level of engagement where children conform, motivated by extrinsic demands, to a higher level of behavioural engagement where their motivation is more intrinsic’ (Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2007). In this respect, various ‘levels’ of engagement were evident throughout the Transport workshop as demonstrated by the participants’ curiosity, emotional connection, active involvement and focused participation. Having explored indicators of engagement, the following discussion explores the factors that potentially impacted on this engagement including planned and emergent approaches to program design, multi-modal experiences, artist roles and relationships, transformative materials and spaces and active family participation.

**Planned and responsive programming**

Preschoolers need a strong basis from which to launch their creative play/narratives—either a strong evocative design, a rich narrative starting point or very specifically worded questions. Working with 20 children necessitates very clear directions and strongly guided group work (artist reflection).

Framed by general themes, many of which stem from well-known and classic rhymes, songs and stories, and a ‘consistent vision for the visuals and narrative’, the artists incorporate the children’s and adult responses and ideas into a co-created ‘theatrical world’ (artist interview). To do this required flexibility, clear communication (verbal and non-verbal) between artists, and an ability to make spontaneous and instinctive decisions regarding which children’s ideas to follow and how. This form of emergent workshop plan required the artists to skilfully monitor the mood and interests of the group so as to sustain engagement and also allow time and space for participants to lead their own play. The artists wanted to ‘structure the play’ so that it had ‘somewhere to lead to’ so that the children and adults ‘feel safe enough to participate, but are also open enough to create a piece of—not a piece of theatre, but a theatrical world together’ (artist interview). To achieve this balance, the artists need to have the confidence ‘to drop the plan’ (artist interview) but also provide sufficient structure so the participants don’t become ‘confused and unsatisfied’ (artist reflection).

This skilful approach to planned and emergent program design links with established views on the need for guided, balanced and responsive approaches to working with young children (Wright, 2003a) and the need to support flow through experiences that have a clear purpose and provide regular feedback to participants (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In response to the question, ‘What did you enjoy?’ the range of child survey responses (n =11) indicates that the workshop program resonated with diverse interests including the train (n= 4), tigers, drawing on the plastic, the bears, ice-skating, the magic carpet and the balloons. These interests were supported by the variety of purposefully planned activities.

**Multi-modal experiences**

The researcher observations revealed that the children were quickly hooked by the artists’ introductions and their engagement was sustained by a series of short inter-linked story events that involved varied modes of participant expression, including drawing, sound making, whole-body movement and dramatic play. Guided by a belief in the power of improvisation and child-directed creative play, the two artists based the workshop experiences on a shared journey of discovery that encouraged the children and families to imagine, play, act-out, draw, embody and dramatise an imaginary story and ‘theatrical world’ (artist interview). This engagement in multi-modal expression (oral, visual, embodied) created a dynamic atmosphere that...
sustained participants’ interests while also providing multiple pathways to learning. As one of the parents noted in the focus group meeting:

I think the importance is having variety, and I think Jenny and Heidi are particularly talented in that they present a variety of things in any of their productions, and they feed off of the children’s interest, and that’s the key and it’s something that seems to be reflected consistently through their programs (focus group discussion).

The opportunity for children to explore an imagined world through multiple modes of expression and reception links with longstanding support for multi-symbolic and integrated learning which helps children to revisit, transform and elaborate upon experience (Dyson, 1990; Wright, 2003b).

Figure 4.

Artist roles: Relationship building and modelling

The Transport workshop began with the artists (authors) in character and welcoming families to their train seats. These dual roles of acting and hosting continued throughout the workshop with the artists leading the emergent story through role-modelling, animated and expressive language and theatrical expression (Figure 4). Adopting the roles of co-artists and co-learners, the two artist–teachers encouraged the children to act out ideas in the context of a fictional story; one that was stimulated and supported by the artists who actively modelled their own aesthetic interests and creative processes (Deans, Brown & Young, 2007). A commitment by artists to collaborative reflective practice stimulated a creative and critical approach to workshop development, while also stimulating continuous professional learning for the two teaching artists. As noted by one artist, ‘The workshops are an opportunity for us to learn how to learn from the children in a dynamic way where we can be free to take their imaginative lead’ (artist interview).

To the artists, the ‘essence’ of the workshop centred on communication, listening and making things together, leading to ‘relationships’ with people, materials and place (artist interview). Such relationship-building, now a central tenet of early childhood education in Australia, focused on encouraging participants to relate to each other and the surrounding environment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). By moving from small family to larger whole-group play, the artists created opportunities for the participants to develop both intimate relations with their parents/carers, as was the case with the final reflective drawing and writing, and more extroverted social interactions with other families through joint activities, such as the journey on the magic carpet. Such relationship-building activities, supported by a safe and social atmosphere, appeared to have a strong impact on engagement.

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Working with a group of over 40 adults and children, the artists had to maintain a high level of animation, physical activity and interaction to sustain group engagement. To manage both their own energy levels and those of the children and families, the workshop program purposefully traversed high and low energy activities, ranging from an exuberant and noisy whole-group boat journey (Figure 5) to quiet and restful moments, such
as individual reflective drawing (Figure 6). This balance of activities helped to manage spiralling group energy and re-focus attention while also providing time and space for autonomous activities required to promote personal engagement (Steele & Fullagar, 2009). While the participants seemed to be happily engaged in the wide range of activities presented, the artists later noted that the atmosphere of the workshop was overly busy (artist reflection). They felt that this focus on active engagement through a wide range of short-term activities was possibly at the expense of other deeper forms of engagement and flow which were less evident throughout the workshop. Thus the question raised is not whether or not the participants were engaged but in what ways were they engaged?

Transformative materials and spaces

Largely custom-designed and transformed for each workshop, the ArtPlay environment allows artists to design the space specifically for each workshop. Set up with only a few rows of boxes that were interpreted as train seats, the Transport workshop immediately stimulated a sense of expectation, supported by the artists, acting in role as train conductors who escorted the ‘passengers’ to their seats. Once participants entered the space, they were encouraged to freely explore their voices and bodies, promoting a sense of participant control and ownership of the space. Using a small collection of purposefully selected props, instruments and found objects, the artists stimulated play and imagination, engaging and re-engaging participants throughout the workshop. Materials such as deep-blue satin fabric and white balloons were selected to provide ‘visually strong materials which can be transformed by them into a variety of interesting shapes and uses’ (artist reflections). The simplicity of these materials is their strength, as noted by one of the fathers contributing to the focus group meeting:

Nothing here ever really relies on lots of bells, lights and whistles. The impact the children are having on the success of the program and the participation of the parents depends very much on their imagination. I think it is actually more effective … it is a space that is safe, clean and not controlled in the sense that my daughter can’t do or explore what she needs to do (focus group discussion).

Both artist and parent responses indicate that the children take home theatrical-play ideas from the workshops and incorporate these into their home play. As one parent noted, ‘Almost everything that is used here, you can find around home’ and thus it is possible to ‘replicate similar experiences with your child’ (focus group meeting). This type of parent feedback is common as the theatrical play stimulated by simple transformative materials leads naturally back to the home, with children animating objects, using theatrical voices and creating soundscapes linked to play (artist interview). This ready transference links with the views proposed by early childhood learning environment designers Curtis and Carter (2003, p. 58) who note that ‘undefined materials invite children to engage their imaginations, see themselves as inventors, and move towards more complex and challenging endeavours’.

Active family engagement

A central element of Pocketful for preschoolers workshops was family participation. Throughout the Transport workshop the artists actively engaged the parents/carers as co-players in both small-group and whole-group activities. Working together, families are able to support each other in a shared imaginary journey that involves risk-taking and uninhibited animated play by both adults and children. Such interactions are skilfully built upon and layered through artist pre-planned small- and large-group activities that encourage role-taking and interaction. A deep connection between children and parents also seemed to have an impact on promoting engagement and creative play, with one parent suggesting that this connection was supported by the environment and ‘relaxed’ nature of the artists that ‘instantly engaged’ the children. As noted by the same parent, this type of experience was both valuable for himself and his child:

I can’t remember which, after the first class, they asked me how things went or how I enjoyed it, and my answer was I had an absolute ball because I let everything go, and for the adults in particular, to be able to come in from the suburb to a group of people that you are never going to see outside of this group is a real opportunity just to let it go. You don’t have to worry about getting hung up about what you are doing or how you’re behaving. The kids pick up on that. They can see dad sort of letting his hair down and prepared to be a clown (parent focus group).

This view resonates with the belief that through engaging in play with their children, families are more likely to maintain strong parent–child bonds (Ginsburg, 2007) and that in the context of play, children are receptive to parental suggestions, and they play in a more sophisticated manner when their caregivers join them (O’Reilly & Bornstein, 1993). The opportunities for co-playing both within families and with others, undertaken in a public place, also seemed to stimulate participants to respond to and connect with the ideas and actions of others. For some families, such interactions are a major reason for bringing their children to ArtPlay. As noted by one parent, a recent immigrant from Vietnam; she brought her child to ArtPlay so as to meet and play with other children and develop her communication skills. For herself, described as a shy person, the experience provided an unexpected
programs can provide opportunities for enriched parent–child relationships (Out of the Box, 2006; Tayler et al., 2006). This case study story provides a basis with which to interpret engagement in practice and to develop a theoretical framework for further validation in relation to other ArtPlay programs. Further to this, the intention of this research is to inform the development of guidelines for other artists working with young children and their families at ArtPlay—an identified need in light of the growing demand for early years community-based arts programs.

References


Table 1: The multiple dimensions of ArtPlay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Type of workshop</th>
<th>Art form</th>
<th>Age groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artists Teachers</td>
<td>One-off</td>
<td>Short-term sequences</td>
<td>Booked (weekend/holiday) School, including preschool Festival-linked Drop-in days</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Three–five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/care-givers</td>
<td></td>
<td>(two to three sessions)</td>
<td>Outreach programs, in schools or other centres, subsequent to ArtPlay-based activities</td>
<td>Visual and plastic arts and craft</td>
<td>Five–nine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>(one term to one year)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Drama and theatre</td>
<td>Nine–13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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‘I want to play when I go to school’: Children’s views on the transition to school from kindergarten

Moska Mirkhil
Monash University

THE BEGINNING OF A CHILD’S JOURNEY to formal schooling is a significant milestone in the early years of a child’s life. Research literature has identified that the manner in which a child experiences the transition to school has significant implications for their future social and academic success at school. This article presents some of the findings from a recent study that examined the multidimensional nature of children’s transition to school. The study specifically explored six children’s views about their transition to school. The study was carried out across three long day care centres in inner suburban Melbourne that provided a kindergarten program for children a year before commencing formal schooling. The study indicated that children were very happy about starting primary school and children’s understanding of school encompassed the social and physical changes to which they will need to adapt when commencing school. The study further suggested that children did not take into consideration the academic aspect of school but just wanted to have fun at school.

Introduction

The first year of school marks an important time of change for children and their families, as a child beginning school experiences a variety of differences from their home or early childhood settings, given that schools are physically, socially and academically diverse environments (Dockett & Perry, 2006). For example, schools comprise a number of classrooms, allocated specialist rooms (such as library, art room, music room) and other essential facilities including canteen, toilets and hall. The social context of school is also different, as there is a large number of children in the same class with one teacher and children may be required to put their hands up to seek the teacher’s attention. The academic demands of school require children to participate in formal learning experiences related to literacy and numeracy within a structured and organised learning environment (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Margetts, 2006; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). As a result, starting school is a significant milestone for children, as it involves more than a change in their daily routine, requiring deeper emotional adjustment to the wide range of challenges posed by formal schooling (Margetts, 2002; Yeo & Clarke, 2005).

Given that entry to school results in children experiencing academic hurdles, a new role as a student and recognition within a new peer group, the literature has further stressed the importance of a successful transition to school. According to the Victorian Department of School Education (1992), starting school is a key challenge that children have to cope with in their early childhood years. A positive start to school is linked closely with positive social and academic outcomes throughout a child’s schooling experience (Briggs & Potter, 1999; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). It is imperative that children receive optimal support in order to allow them to experience accomplishment at both social and academic levels throughout their formal education.

In the domain of children’s transition to school there is compelling evidence that children need to have active roles in their journey towards formal schooling. Providing children with the opportunity to engage in research that directly affects them allows the young learners to take ownership of the shift to school. A major research study performed by Yeo and Clarke (2005) with 340 children in the first year of school in Singapore indicated that the children had a very good understanding of the difference between their early childhood settings and primary schools. The children also exhibited sound understanding of behavioural expectations at school and rules that govern the setting. This study indicates that children as young as six years
of age are able to provide logical explanations about their feelings towards school. Children's capacity to share their views about the transition to school was also evident in another study conducted in Brunei by Kitson (2004). The study was undertaken with 18 children who had recently made the transition to school. The children in this study were able to discuss their feelings about school, such as elements of school that they looked forward to and anxieties. Findings from these studies further imply that adults involved in children's transition to school need to provide children with opportunities to express their feelings about school and attend to children's concerns effectively (Westcott, Jones & Dockett, 2003).

Starting school is a significant time of change for children as the experience of attending school has a direct impact on them on a daily basis. Therefore, further research has outlined that incorporating children's views with regard to school is an essential practice in identifying their views and attending to their concerns. A study undertaken in Melbourne with 40 children in the first year of school demonstrated that the children were aware of the differences between the teaching approaches implemented in the kindergarten and school sectors (Clyde, 2001). The children perceived that at kindergarten they could play but at school it was time to learn ideas through a different mode of learning. Children's awareness of the curricular–pedagogical discontinuities associated with their shift to school is further supported by research conducted by Potter and Briggs (2003). In this study, children were happy with the hands-on teaching approach that their teacher implemented. This finding indicates that children are aware of the difference in the pedagogy of kindergarten and school, and having that familiarity before starting school may contribute to children's capacity to adjust successfully to school.

Children starting school are confronted with a range of differences between social relationships at school and those in kindergarten. In the Starting School Research Project (SSRP) undertaken by Dockett and Perry (2007), children's major concern in adjusting to school was friendships and obeying the rules that govern the school setting (Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2000). Such findings were replicated by Potter and Briggs (2003), Peters (2003) and Kitson (2004), as children in these particular studies also considered the development of friendships as an essential aspect of adjusting to school. The findings in relation to children's perception of friendships suggest that the development of interpersonal relationships affects children's attitudes towards school and that strong friendships add to children's enjoyment at school (Kitson, 2004; Peters, 2003). The great emphasis that children placed on knowing the rules of school indicates that knowledge of what is right, what to do and when to do it is important for children, as it may provide them with a sense of security and emotional comfort. This further demonstrates that allowing children to share their feelings about school may enable kindergarteners to be prepared for the demands made during the commencement of school (Yeo & Clarke, 2005).

**The study**

This study was carried out across three long day care centres in inner suburban Melbourne, Australia. The three long day care centres all provided a kindergarten program for children of three to five years of age. Children were able to attend the settings on a full-time, part-time, half-day, hourly and sessional basis. The centres catered for children's individual needs and offered a wide range of experiences in their session programming. There were six children who participated in the study and attended kindergarten on a full-time basis.

In this qualitative study I intended to gain an insight into children's views about their transition to school and therefore implemented a semi-structured interview. Data was collected from the children in the study over a two-month period. Furthermore, to probe children's thinking about the transition to school, a picture storybook (Starting school—by Anne Civardi, 1995) about children commencing school was read to the children. At the end of the interview, the children were invited to draw a picture of themselves on their first day of school. The interviews with the children were not piloted but the issues embedded in them were drawn from reading the literature and research reports.

**Findings**

The interview sessions with the children in their last year of kindergarten education unveiled children's views and feelings about the transition to school. In particular, the following themes emerged: understanding of school, experiences children look forward to doing at school, anxieties about school and children's transitional experiences.

**Understanding of school**

The children were asked to describe the primary schools that they would be attending the following year. It was apparent from the interviews that this group of children was very conscious of the physical aspects of the primary school environment. The children's descriptions were related to the wide variety of classrooms that exist in a primary school and the different types of outdoor play areas that are available for the children to play in during their school days. Robert discussed the variety at the school that he will be attending: 'It's got like all different rooms split up; well, there is like a little bridge between one room and the next … Playgrounds outside, like a slippery dip, a climbing
frame and I think a monkey bar’. This indicates that children are able to distinguish between the physical environment of their kindergarten and that of their primary school. Jessica also recalled from her visits to her primary school the difference in the number of older children at school. Jessica explained this: ‘Um, there's lots and lots of big kids’. This suggests that children also have an understanding of the age range of children at primary school.

Experiences children look forward to doing at school

The children were invited to share the experiences that they look forward to engaging in when they start school. The children made the following suggestions:

- George—going to prep, participate in concerts, playing
- Robert—building things, playing, make friends
- Amy—doing paintings, playing
- Anthony—drawing, eating lunch, playing football, playing
- Jessica—drawing, playing, making friends.

The children's responses suggested that they look forward to having fun at school and undertaking activities that they love doing. It is further apparent that these children were not interested in learning how to read or count, but in having an exciting time at school.

Anxieties about school

The children were given the opportunity to discuss any concerns that they had with respect to attending primary school. All the children were very happy about starting formal schooling and entering the primary school environment. However, George believed that going to school may be difficult for him, as he thought he would find learning everyone's names a challenge, and he further described this as an obstacle, as he believed that it contributed to his shy personality. George made the following comment:

Interviewer: Is there is anything that you are worried about going to prep?
George: Sometimes I am a little bit shy.
Interviewer: What makes you shy?
George: Because I don’t know everyone’s names at primary school, so I will get shy.

Children’s transitional experiences

The experiences that children participate in during their last year of kindergarten for the purpose of their transition to school serve an important role. All of the children in this study were aware of the schools that they would be attending for the first year of school. The majority of the children were able to provide the name of their primary school while other children understood that this was their last year at kindergarten and in the following year they would be beginning school which they identified as ‘prep’ and primary school.

Given that children in this study were enrolled in different schools, they were at different stages of the transition programs that were being offered by their respective schools. Most of the children had attended their proposed school and visited its different areas and also met some of the teaching staff. Two children in this study had older siblings at school; therefore, their familiarity with their primary school was greater in comparison to children who did not.

Children’s drawing of first day at school

The drawings clearly reflect children's awareness of their proposed primary school and, more importantly, their feelings about attending school. Each child drew themselves on their first day at school with a big smile. Examples of such drawings are shown in Figure 1, with direct comments made by the children about their drawings.

Figure 1. Drawings by study participants depicting how they envisage their first day of school

Katie’s drawing: My primary school, me, some fruit I will take and the sun.

Anthony’s drawing: This is a house, a school, a swing, a ball and a school and me on my first day.
Amy’s drawing: We step on this and this and this [pointing to hopscotch figure drawn]. And we come in and look here what the people are doing.

George’s drawing: I am playing outside in the playground and it is a hot day in primary school. I am on the green grass.

Jessica’s drawing: I draw the door, the tables in the room, and that’s me and that is the tallest teacher at [X].

Robert’s drawing: Well, there is lots of special rooms in there; they have rooms that stay open very late and I am outside on my first day waiting to go in.

Discussion

The transition to school has a significant impact on all stakeholders involved, most importantly the children making the shift to school. Research has clearly outlined that a study of children’s transition to school cannot neglect the voice of the children (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Yeo & Clarke, 2005).

The children in this study articulated their understanding of the transition to school based on the observations that they made during their transition programs. The interviews with the children demonstrated that they were able to distinguish between physical and social differences between kindergarten and school. Such findings further suggest that the children realise that they have a larger environment to participate in and that they will interact with other children who are physically bigger than them. The children’s dialogue about the physical and social climate may also imply that children spoke about key features of the school scene that initially confronted them when they visited the school. These findings correlate with those found by Yeo and Clarke (2005), who observed that the children in their sample were able to distinguish the physical differences between kindergarten and school. This highlights that the clear physical and social discontinuities between kindergarten and school can impact on children’s abilities to adjust to primary school, and implies that collaboration between stakeholders is required in order to ease children’s entry to school.

The present study revealed that extending social networks and having fun were central to children’s views on their positive transition to school. In commencing school, children engage in various types of experiences comprising social and academic events within their classroom and the wider school environment. The children’s response to what they look forward to doing at school suggests that children hope...
to participate in activities that they currently enjoy doing at kindergarten. The concept of playing was mentioned by all six children, indicating that the children value fun when they commence school. Robert and Jessica both stated that they wanted to make friends. This implies that having friends at school allows the children to have a connection with their new environment. In relation to earlier research, Peters (2003) found that having friends at school was an essential source of support for children inside the classroom and during morning and lunch play times. In the study undertaken by Kitson (2004), some degree of happiness children exhibited about school was related to having friends. In a study by Potter and Briggs (2003), children enjoyed going to school as they wanted to play with their friends. The findings of the present study and earlier research imply that children's social adjustment to school is important in making children's experience at school positive. The focus on the play and social aspects of school by the children does, however, indicate that they do not appear to have an understanding of the academic aspect of school. That the children lack an understanding of the academic nature of formal schooling may be a result of the children coming from the play-based environment of the kindergarten setting, where they learn through play. This further suggests that stakeholders engaged in children's transition to school need to be aware of the significant difference between kindergarten and primary school in order to ease children's transition to school.

Children's transition to school has been identified as an in-depth adjustment to the social and emotional atmosphere of school (Yeo & Clarke, 2003). In the present study, the general happiness and excitement that was demonstrated by the children suggests that they are looking forward to embarking upon their formal education. George's concern about learning new names suggests that he is worried about the social dimension of school and his shy nature may also contribute to such anxiety. This concern of learning names was also reported by Margetts (2006), as that study found that peer relationships were a key factor for the children in the preparatory grade. This indicates that transition programs need to include effective strategies to ensure that children are able to relate to their peers by learning one another's names and developing friendships (Margetts, 2006).

The children's discussion about their transitional experiences at school also varied. One key factor which explained this variation was the fact that two children in the current study had an older sibling at school. These children had developed a greater insight into the school that they would be attending in comparison to children who did not have siblings at school. The other factor that resulted in such a variation was that the children were all attending different schools; as a result, they were in different phases of their transition programs. The children's insight into their transitional experiences demonstrated that the children were aware of their shift to primary school. This highlights that the children in this study were being gradually prepared for the commencement of their formal schooling through the support of their families, kindergarten and primary school. This further implies that children's transition to school is a unique experience for each child. Therefore, educators in kindergarten and primary school settings, families and children need to be actively engaged in the transition to school to ensure that it is a positive experience for all those involved (Dockett & Perry, 2006, 2007; Kitson, 2004).

Conclusion

The children's views about the transition-to-school process varied depending on their level of involvement in their proposed primary school. The children who had experienced further transition experiences at their primary school were able to provide a more detailed account of their transition experiences. Overall, the children were very excited about commencing primary school and doing activities that they currently enjoyed at kindergarten. Therefore, the significant findings of this study indicated that the children's ideas about school focused on friends, play and the physical environment, as a contrast to the academic learning.

Children with older siblings already attending primary school had an extended understanding of the routines they will adopt at home and at school when they commence school. Therefore, the children were happy to be doing similar activities to those undertaken by their siblings at home. The children were also keen on participating in the extracurricular experiences offered at school, such as annual concerts that are held in the primary school settings. This indicates that children's views about school were influenced by the level of involvement that they had in the primary school setting.

The children's drawings of their first day of school provided a more in-depth account of their perception of their transition to primary school and further emphasised their contentment in doing activities that they enjoy at kindergarten. Thus, the children all want to go to school and want to be given the opportunity to play. This further suggests that the children's viewpoint on the transition to school does not take into consideration the academic aspect of school when, in reality, the preparatory grade involves children being engaged in relatively more formal and structured learning activities than in the kindergarten. This indicates that the transition to school may become a stressful experience for kindergarteners, given the difference in children's understanding of primary school and the experiences that children are required to undertake in their first year of school.
The input of children in this study has suggested that children are informed about aspects of school before commencing school. The children’s views further stress the importance of involving children in events that directly impact on their development. Moreover, with an understanding of children’s perception with regard to the transition to school, educators in both settings are better able to prepare children for this significant turning point in their educational journey. Therefore, open lines of communication between educators in kindergartens and primary school settings, in conjunction with children’s families, is perhaps a fundamental step in facilitating children’s transition to school.

References


