The Curriculum Issue:

Technological funds of knowledge in children’s play: Implications for early childhood educators

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Editorial

INTERNATIONALLY AND NATIONALLY, EARLY childhood education has been characterised in recent years by discussion, research, debate and policy analysis and implementation associated with the early childhood curriculum. The debates and discussions about the early childhood curriculum have been intensely interesting and focused on a range of curriculum dimensions, such as the role of content, the pedagogical role of play and the ways in which particular theoretical perspectives about children, childhood, learning and development orient the curriculum towards certain outcomes and learning emphases. In terms of policy analysis and implementation, there has been much discussion regarding the relationship between the provision of ‘quality’ early childhood education, and the use of formalised curriculum documents as a baseline for the delivery of early childhood education. These developments represent a period of refreshing growth in the early childhood sector and have led to new thinking around how, why and to what end early childhood professionals engage with young children, their families and communities to support learning in the early years. This special edition of the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood seeks to celebrate the efforts that have gone into understanding and investigating curriculum in early childhood education in recent years, and in doing so, offers a contribution to the early childhood curriculum discussion and literature that supports contemporary investigations in the area and poses some potentially new areas of investigation.

The special issue commences with an article by Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence who engage with ideas surrounding the notion of quality early childhood curriculum. They suggest that, rather than focusing on the idea of ‘universal’ quality, it may be more productive to work towards conceptions of quality that relate to, and are informed by, the particular contexts in which a service might be located. They argue that a postmodern perspective on the early childhood curriculum may help us to realise that there is no one ‘best’ curriculum that can meet the needs of all children. Rather, working from a postmodern perspective allows educators to think about ‘possible’ curriculum and how ‘possible’ curriculum can be realised to meet the needs, aims and interests of children and families within their particular contexts. In this way curriculum is seen as being in a state of ‘permanent evaluation and change’ (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence, 2010). Gibbons similarly engages with the suggestion that there cannot be a universal understanding of the concept ‘curriculum’ in early childhood education. His paper suggests that the experiences both student teachers and young children bring to their learning within early years education serve to define how they experience the curriculum such that curriculum cannot be understood universally—rather as a personally constructed experience into which learners will read their own meaning.

Following these, a set of papers provides a focus on the nature of contextualised meaning-making. In these examples, the contexts are related to the interface between children’s experiences of digitally mediated contexts and popular culture as a basis for thinking about the role of curriculum in children’s lives. For example, Fleer uses a cultural-historical reading of how play activity changes over time in relation to community needs, and the way in which this may have driven curriculum development in the past. In doing so, she considers the role of technological and popular culture in children’s lives and how these connect with their daily ‘reality-based’ activities as a new way of thinking about the framing of early childhood curriculum in contemporary times. Hedges reports research findings from her investigations into children’s interactions with popular culture as funds of knowledge and considers the extent to which these funds are utilised as a driver for curriculum activity within early childhood contexts. Finally, Mawson examines what children’s independent collaborative play has to offer in terms of noting how children use and think about technological knowledge. He argues that educators with strong content and pedagogical knowledge in the area of ICTs are likely to be better equipped at incorporating these forms of play in the early childhood curriculum in a way which enables children to think critically about the role of technologies in their lives and how technology use can shape their understandings of the world. These papers offer important insights into how the early years curriculum and pedagogies associated with the early childhood curriculum might be seen to intersect with children’s experiences within digital and popularly mediated contexts within their home, family and community settings.

This theme is thoughtfully examined by Harrison in her exposition which seeks to consider the connections between the well-loved children’s television program Play School and contemporary movements within the early childhood literature which have challenged traditional discourses around children’s learning and development, and the constituents of ‘community’ and ‘family’. Harrison has made insightful links between the
evolving history of *Play School* in relation to changing social practices and theoretical perspectives in early childhood education which are framed in relation to the national (Australian) *Early Years Learning Framework*.

The role and positioning of play, learning, environmental education, gender and children's rights in early childhood curricula form the basis of the remaining two papers. In each of these papers, research surrounding the relationship between play as a pedagogical tool is linked to children's learning experiences in relation to the Swedish national curriculum (*Sandberg and Arlemalm-Hagser*) and the Australian *Early Years Learning Framework* (*Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie*). In her paper, *Sandberg* provides a review of the literature related to play and learning which links strongly to contemporary discussion around how play shapes children's experiences within the early years of curriculum in terms of their rights to contribute to a program of activities, their experiences of gender, and the way in which they might be encouraged to think about sustainability and their role in the world. Issues around teaching and learning about sustainability in the early years are also examined in *Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie*'s paper which reports research findings investigating the ways in which play-based learning might be articulated to the teaching and learning of environmental education within the early childhood curriculum.

As the contributions to this special edition show, the early childhood curriculum is increasingly understood as a site for constructing meaning and learning derived from children's family, social and cultural experiences. Context is becoming an increasingly important mediator for understanding and thinking about curriculum, particularly in terms of what is it young children bring to the curriculum from their contexts—but also in terms of the way curriculum can be used to help children understand, engage and critically reflect on these contexts (whether these involve their experiences of digital media, popular culture, gender, technologies and/or perspectives on sustainability).

The arguments and agendas that emerge from this collection of papers suggest future potential for research, policy development and implementation and early childhood practice to consider the many ways in which the emerging relationships between curriculum, contemporary perspectives on learning and development and children's family, community and digitally mediated contexts might continue to inform each other as a basis for thinking about learning and teaching in the early years.

Susan Edwards and Jennifer Sumsion

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**Addendum**

Early Childhood Australia would like to apologise for the misprints in AJEC 1003 and AJEC 1004 with the correct details listed below.

**AJEC 1003 Addendum**

**Page 24** Exploring transition through biographical memory: Considerations for parents and teachers in early childhood education

Sonja Rosewarne, Open Polytechnic, Dr E. Jayne White, University of Waikato and Lyn Wright, New Zealand Ministry of Education.

**Page 77** Promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing in childcare centres within low socioeconomic areas: Strategies, facilitators and challenges.

**AJEC 1004 Addendum**

It has come to our attention that a mistake has occurred on the cover of AJEC Vol. 35 No.4 December 2010, articles from AJEC Vol. 34 No.4 December 2009 were printed on the cover. We would like to apologise for the inconvenience this may cause.

Elise Davis, University of Melbourne, Naomi Priest, University of Melbourne, Belinda Davies, Deakin University, Margaret Sims, Edith Cowan University, Linda Harrison, Charles Sturt University, Helen Herrman, University of Melbourne, Elizabeth Waters, University of Melbourne, Lyndal Strazdins, Australian National University, Bernie Marshall, Deakin University, and Kay Cook, Deakin University.
Curricula/frameworks in Canadian early childhood education

Over the past five years, Canadian provincial governments have been actively involved in designing and implementing curricula documents or frameworks for practice as a way to achieve ‘quality’ in early childhood services. While this approach to ‘quality’ has been common in various Western countries (e.g. Sweden, Italy, Spain, New Zealand—Bennett, 2004; Moss, 2005), Canada has only recently engaged in institutionalising pedagogies. Part of this growing interest has been the result of international calls for quality early childhood education (OECD, 2003). Canada has been criticised for its mediocre systems and lack of commitment in supporting the care and education of young children (OECD, 2003).

In response to this criticism, several provincial governments have developed a curriculum or framework to enhance quality (e.g. Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; Government of British Columbia, 2008; Early Childhood Research and Development Team, 2007; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). These curricula or frameworks address, broadly speaking, pedagogical issues to be considered, and in some cases followed, by early childhood educators and other practitioners working in early childhood services. They range from developmental standards for assessing children’s normal development to general guidelines and frameworks for early childhood educators to reflect upon as they engage with children and families.

An interesting trend in the recently published Canadian curricula/frameworks is a move away from long-debated guidelines such as Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) which have dominated the thinking within early childhood education (ECE) for many decades in North America (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Responding to the critiques of the DAP guidelines, some governments (e.g. British Columbia, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan) have demonstrated an interest in embedding aspects of postmodern practices and theories (Early Childhood Research and Development Team, 2007; Government of British Columbia, 2008; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). These documents speak of children's identities as complex, multiple, and situated within historical, cultural and social contexts. They move away from standardised testing, acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity (typically through the inclusion of indigenous issues), and propose tools such as pedagogical documentation and learning stories as preferred methods for engaging in practices that value depth and context. In this article, we loosely refer to these curricula/frameworks as ‘postmodern’.

The postmodern curriculum: Making space for historically and politically situated understandings

Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw
Alan Pence
University of Victoria, Canada

BY ENGAGING POSTSTRUCTURAL, postmodern and indigenous lenses, this article explores challenges associated with recently developed ‘postmodern’ early childhood education curricula. The authors propose that curricula should not be seen as neutral, but rather as historically and politically situated documents that require dynamic and critical engagements from educators. We situate our analysis within Canada.
This article considers some of the challenges that postmodern curricula/frameworks pose. The first part of the article briefly describes postmodern approaches to early childhood from the perspective of the ‘discourse of meaning-making’. The second part situates postmodern curricula/frameworks within the context of the ‘discourse of meaning-making’—noting some general challenges and/or ‘ideas to consider’. Our intent is not to discuss whether these curricula/frameworks are good or bad, but rather what opportunities they present, what limitations they have, and what needs to be considered as educators engage with curricula/frameworks that embrace broad strokes of the postmodern.

The discourse of meaning-making: Moving beyond modernity

Some recently created curricula/frameworks have embraced some of the critiques of the instrumentation approach to ‘quality’ that has dominated the early childhood education field in Canada for a long time. Instrumentation and reductionist approaches to quality have been problematised as a too narrow approach to the diverse ways of being and becoming (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Such approaches are based on a modernist belief in a singular definition of ‘best’—that through a scientific and experimental approach a transcendent ‘truth’ will be revealed. While the physical sciences (used as the model for social science research) have long since given up on assumptions of ‘objectivity’ and sense of instrumental ‘neutrality’, some social sciences (child development among them) have maintained that position—even bowing to the fact that such ‘truths’ fail their own scientific criteria for the claims of generalisability put forward. For example, how could ‘universals’ in child development be based on research that covers, at best, five per cent of the world’s child population (Arnett, 2008; Pence & Hix-Small, 2009)? Clearly, there is much more to quality than ‘quality instruments’ and much more to child development than US-based norms. Childhood and the experiences of childhood are cultural and contextually constructed and situated. What constitutes a ‘good childhood’, as well as a ‘good adulthood’, varies enormously, and to expect a theory, an instrument, or a set of values to adequately represent that diversity is not possible. Contextualised meaning-making is central to an adequate understanding of children, children’s programs and policies.

Given these critiques, the construct of ‘quality’ has been re-imagined and alternative perspectives have been posited by scholars in the field. Dahlberg and colleagues (1999) have suggested a move from the discourse of ‘quality’ to the discourse of meaning-making. The discourse of meaning-making acknowledges the different ways of seeing and being in the world and early childhood education institutions. The two discourses, quality and meaning-making, are situated within different philosophical traditions and embed different values and assumptions. Here Dahlberg and colleagues (1999) provide a description of the discourse of meaning-making:

The discourse of meaning making speaks first and foremost about constructing and deepening understanding of the early childhood institution and its projects, in particular the pedagogical work—to make meaning of what is going on. From constructing these understandings, people may choose to continue by attempting to make judgments about the work, a process involving the application of values to understanding to make a judgment of value. Finally, people may further choose to see some agreement with others about these judgments—to struggle to agree, to some extent, about what is going on and its value (p. 106).

With the discourse of meaning-making, alternative pedagogies emerge—pedagogies that allow children and educators to co-construct knowledge and to resist dominant understandings that have become normalised. These new forms of pedagogies have been an important aspect of some of the recently created curricula/frameworks in Canada. For example, the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (Government of British Columbia, 2008) refers to the notion that there is not one approach to learning or that learning is not necessarily unilateral. The framework values the flexible child and the flexible educator who are always shifting positions within the multiple contexts they inhabit:

Young children’s powerful drive to learn is inextricably linked to their emerging identities as members of social, cultural, linguistic, and geographic communities. Children’s curiosity inspires them to interact with other people, and with things and places in their environments, virtually from birth. It is in the dance between children and other children and adults that language and culture are created and recreated from generation to generation. In this dance, children are sometimes the leaders, and adults the followers, and vice versa. Adults’ responses to children’s activities—whether they respond, the appropriateness of their responses, and the creativity of their responses—affect young children’s early learning capacities and their growing sense of themselves as members of their communities. These interactions also give adults the opportunity to learn, grow, and change, and to cultivate a disposition that welcomes children’s contributions (p. 10).

In this article we are interested in the relationship between postmodern curricula and the discourse of
meaning-making. How might postmodern curricula/frameworks be interpreted/thought of when working within postmodern paradigms? Several challenges arise when postmodern curricula/frameworks are seen through the lenses of the discourse of meaning-making. In the next section, we use poststructural, feminist and postcolonial theories to note some of these challenges.

**Curriculum and the discourse of meaning-making: Working within postmodernity**

First, postmodern curricula/frameworks cannot be thought of as innocent tools that provide the solution to the complex landscape of early childhood education. Such a position would involve returning to the singularity of modernist ways of thinking. In Beyond Quality, Dahlberg and colleagues (1999) suggest we should not ‘fool ourselves about what frameworks of normalization [e.g. discourse of ‘quality’] are or what they can do’ (p. 116). They say: ‘Let us recognize their limitations and dangers, their assumptions and values. Let them not be at the expense of ignoring other ways of thinking about and making sense of early childhood institutions and the work they do’ (p. 116). We believe that similar concerns need to be considered when engaging with ‘postmodern’ curricula/frameworks.

At the same time, we do not suggest that curricula/frameworks are bad and should be forgotten. Rather, we suggest re-imagining the ways educators engage with their meanings, their implications, and their uses. In other words, it is important to continue to engage with the discourse of meaning-making when working with postmodern curricula/frameworks. These ideas were noted by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (2000) almost a decade ago:

> The field [of curriculum studies] no longer sees the problems of curriculum and teaching as ‘technical’ problems, that is problems of ‘how to’. The contemporary field regards the problems of curriculum and teaching as ‘why’ problems. Such a view requires that we understand what was before considered only something to be solved. Now, the contemporary field is hardly against solving problems, but the view today is that solutions to problems do not just require knee-jerk, commonsensical responses, but careful, thoughtful, disciplined understandings (p. 8).

The words speak about engagements with curriculum, about acknowledging and struggling with its complexities, about deliberation, and about the necessity of viewing curriculum as a provocation to ask difficult questions. Curriculum cannot become what educators follow, a single direction that educators need to take, that which early childhood education services need to overcome or to manage or to conquer (Looney, 2001). Curriculum can instead become an opportunity for resisting, for making meaning, and furthermore for searching for other (invisible, out-of-sight) meanings. Researchers and educators are not blindly to follow these curricula/frameworks because they embrace aspects of the postmodern, but can instead engage meaningfully in contesting and resisting them by asking questions that will bring practice to ‘other’ spaces. Again, this does not mean that these documents are to be dismissed, rather that they need to be used ‘differently’—perhaps through the lenses of the meaning-making discourse.

This re-imagination involves understanding postmodern curricula/frameworks as being historically, socially and politically situated within relations of power (not outside of them), as social constructions (not Truths). Dussel, Tiramonti and Birgin (2000) suggested thinking of curricula/frameworks as part of ‘new maps of relations between the centre and the periphery of the educational system’ (p. 537). The questions to ask are: What new cartographies of power do postmodern curricula/frameworks establish? How are young children and educators re-positioned and re-shaped within these new cartographies? What new languages are created and for what purposes?

The precise idea of curriculum is also to be situated within its own historical context. Curriculum emerged as a ‘grand narrative’ of the West, as part of the technical-rational or factory model to construct efficient and effective societies (Pinar et al., 2000). In the same way that the discourse of quality is understood ‘in relation to the modernist search for order and certainty’ (Dahlberg et al., p. 89), Lenz Taguchi (2008) suggests understanding curricula/frameworks as part of administrative and regulatory societal practices—even when those documents attempt to embrace postmodernity.

As mentioned above, the postmodern curriculum/framework stresses diversity, and a particularly valuable lens for such diversity has been Indigenous perspectives. Because curricula/frameworks are always situated within social, political and historical contexts, they are also to be examined in relation to colonial histories (Weenie, 2008). In Canada, as in other countries, curricula and frameworks for practice have acted as tools through which Indigenous communities’ languages, ways of being and doing, and cultural knowledge have been marginalised and often silenced. Postcolonial and Indigenous theories have made important contributions to the understanding of curriculum. These insights are to be considered within the context of early childhood education.

> The landscape of Aboriginal curriculum involves the colonial history, worldviews, philosophies, languages, cultures, stories, songs, literature, art,
spirituality, ceremonies and ethos of Aboriginal people. These are the ‘things’ or objects that make up our embodied ways of knowing. They form a body of knowledge that represent the order of things in the worlds we live and work in. They constitute an Indigenous model of curriculum that can no longer be disregarded. They cannot be mere add-ons or supplementary pieces but the core components of Aboriginal curriculum. Curricular theorizing from this standpoint needs to be ‘an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and our anticipated future’ (Weenie, 2008, p. 551–2).

The treatment of Indigenous issues in Canadian ECE postmodern curricula/frameworks is often through side-bars. As educators actively engage with the documents, they are, as Weenie (2008) suggests in her quote, to destabilise these approaches to the treatment of Aboriginal issues in curriculum documents and engage in deeper contestations that move educational communities beyond mere acknowledgement and inclusion toward decolonisation.

Finally, the re-imagination of curriculum requires thinking critically about a key element of the postmodern curricula/frameworks: reflexive practice. Poststructural and feminist scholars have warned us of the dangers of reflexivity as a way of engaging in a process of searching for educators’ inner feelings (Burman, 2009; MacNaughton, 2003). These types of reflexive practices, although presented as a counterpart to technicisation and instrumentalisation, have become part of neo-liberal strategies of government. Fendler (2003) notes that ‘some reflective practices may simply be exercises in reconfirming, justifying, or rationalizing preconceived ideas’ (p. 16). These critiques suggest that, when engaged in reflective practice, educators perhaps need to remember that the goal is not to find an answer to their problems, but rather that reflective practice can be used ‘to tell a story that is just that: a story, a situated, everyday practices, but rather that reflective practice can create new possibilities for early childhood education in ‘careful, thoughtful, and disciplined’ ways and requiring the deduction of objectives or goals. They provide general principles and criteria that require fertile action—in other words these principles and criteria are to be translated and re-created in specific that I had easily slid into reconfirming what I already thought—in spite of understanding myself as practicing critical reflection for the purpose of improving practice—shocked me… (p. 88).

Reflective practice can become risky business if the historically, socially and politically implicated discourses are not deconstructed. Critical reflection cannot be about making the self visible, but about re-imagining new subjectivities in relation to different contexts.

**Possibilities**

We welcome these recently developed curricula/frameworks that attempt to respond to the critiques of modernity for the possibilities they present in comparison to more narrow policies and discourses. We are, however, cautious about how they are understood, how they are used, and what messages are taken from them.

Like Pinar and colleagues (2000), we invite the reader to think of curriculum as ‘intensely historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international’ (p. 847). Postmodern curricula/frameworks in early childhood education can become ‘the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world’ through ‘an extraordinarily complicated conversation’ (Pinar et al., 2000, p. 848). Pinar and his colleagues note:

> Once we shift the point of the curriculum away from the institutional, economic, and political goals of others, once we ‘take it back’ for ourselves, we realize we must explore curriculum as a historical event itself. That is, as soon as we take hold of the curriculum as an opportunity for ourselves, as citizens, as persons, we realize that curriculum changes as we reflect on it, engage in its study, and act in response to it, toward the realization of our ideals and dreams. Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labor, it becomes the product of our labor, changing as we are changed by it (p. 848).

Postmodern curricula/frameworks open spaces for educators to engage in dialogue with practice in ‘careful, thoughtful, and disciplined’ ways and create new possibilities for early childhood education curriculum itself. Postmodern curricula/frameworks cannot be used as ‘how to’ guides but as documents that embrace the idea of curriculum as a dynamic and fluid encounter. They are not technical formulas requiring the deduction of objectives or goals. They provide general principles and criteria that require fertile action—in other words these principles and criteria are to be translated and re-created in specific
local contexts. This approach requires that educators rethink the institution and the educational practices which are always subject to revision, evaluation and re-adjustments. Revisions and re-adjustments can be done in relation to dynamic social, political and pedagogical changes that require constant analysis and re-thinking. Key to the argument made in this article is that there is not a ‘best’ curriculum, but a possible curriculum in permanent evaluation and change. Instead of using curricula/frameworks as technologies of social control, educators can use these documents for the production of new worlds or new realities for themselves and the children they work with.

References


The incoherence of curriculum: Questions concerning early childhood teacher educators

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THIS PAPER EXAMINES CURRICULUM DEBATES, particularly those that influence an understanding of the nature and purpose of curriculum, in providing teacher education and in influencing teaching practice. The work of Martin Heidegger provides a framework for questioning the early childhood teacher education curriculum. Central to this analysis are tensions between coherence and diversity; and training and education. For instance, a tension exists between perceiving the practice of educating early childhood teachers as a practice of downloading the ‘right’ knowledge about children, childhood, and pedagogy; alternatively, early childhood teacher education is perceived as a practice of providing a space in which a teacher may develop a ‘teaching self’.

AT SOME POINT A STUDENT of early childhood teacher education is likely to hear or read that early childhood curriculum is holistic. In a society characterised and valued as multicultural, such a definition has an appeal, allowing for diverse views on curriculum and promoting the idea that curriculum can be debated. Is, however, early childhood teacher education all-encompassing in its understanding of curriculum?

This paper considers the impact of a teacher education curriculum on an early childhood teacher in terms of knowledge, skills and identity. The first section argues for the importance of questioning, drawing upon the work of Martin Heidegger, in order to frame questions that can be asked of both teacher education and early childhood education. The paper then engages with questions concerning what should be taught in teacher education. A definition of curriculum is provided before considering two debates: what emphases should be given to knowledge of teaching in relation to knowledge of self when studying to be a teacher; and to what extent should the provision of teacher education be coherent across different institutional providers of early childhood teacher education? The paper draws some implications from this analysis in terms of both the experience of teacher education and the application of this education in the teacher’s professional life in early childhood centres.

Questions concerning curriculum

Michael Peters (2009) argues that Heidegger’s work makes an important contribution to thinking about education, with a particular focus on the opening up of the way we think about education, and how education impacts upon human experience. Heidegger (1977) was dedicated to the practice of questioning. Questioning, he suggested, builds the pathways upon which we navigate our lives. In this dedication, Heidegger is not alone. From the ancient Socrates through a multitude of philosophers, educationalists and policy-makers, the complex practice of questioning is regarded as a highly skilled and rewarding human activity believed to influence our individual and collective qualities of life. An inquisitive mind is arguably regarded as a desirable quality in early childhood teachers (see, for instance, Aitken & Kennedy, 2007).

Heidegger’s questions were primarily ontological in that they focused upon concepts such as truth, dwelling and technology, and their impact upon what it means to experience being human. Like Rousseau, Heidegger observed around him a world fixated on progress through science and technology in which nature and human identity are restricted and exploited. In educational terms, Heidegger observed a landscape in which institutions were being subjected to demands
of efficiency and productivity in order to exploit the maximum potential of students. In this context, a teacher education would be of concern where its outcomes were too predetermined, too regulated, and too universalised. Similarly, in early childhood settings, such concerns might be raised when quality early childhood education is defined by central authorities in terms of contribution to the economy, or prescribed and measurable standards of early educational achievement. For some, these descriptions are a lived experience (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 99) and concerning reality (see, for instance, Fasoli, Scrivens & Woodrow, 2007).

Arguably, however, Heidegger would not have said it was wrong to think of the early years in these terms, but that it would be wrong to think of them solely in these terms, hence forgetting that there are other values, purposes, experiences and ways to think about education. That there are other values, purposes, experiences and ways to think is evident for Heidegger in the questioning of truth.

The very meaning of truth, and its impact on human beings, varies in different horizons, or cultural clearings (Heidegger, 1977; Young, 2002). Here Heidegger suggests, in his twentieth century cultural context, that there is a tendency to forget that truth is constructed by humans within a horizon, and that we cannot know truth from outside of this horizon. Our horizon confines our particular way of thinking about the world, and a particular way of communicating about the world we think about. The problem, identified through Nietzsche and Heidegger, is that the teacher education curriculum is often conceived as not particular at all, it is not considered contextual, and truths about the curriculum are promoted as horizonless. This suggests what Young (2002, p. 29) calls a ‘misunderstanding’ of reality and truth through which it is not considered possible that, in another ‘reality-revealing horizon’ or cultural clearing, teacher education will be an essentially foreign and unknowable phenomenon. There might not even be a belief in the need to subject humans to teacher training. An example relevant to Aotearoa/New Zealand or Australia might highlight that colonial and indigenous views on how adults are prepared to pass on essential knowledge to young children have been, are, and could be (in the future) different.

In language, and in poetry, Heidegger perceived other ways of thinking about phenomena such as schooling and curricula, and that these ways of thinking provide a means to resist the seemingly oppressive terrains of modern education. Much of his work is then dedicated to questioning certain ways of thinking about technology, language, education and science, through his creative use of language, and through examining other historical relationships to (for instance) education. In Building dwelling thinking (1971) and A question concerning technology (1977), unravelling language allows Heidegger’s thinking about technology and language to take shape. He warns that humans have a tendency to assume control over language, yet language, like many technologies that appear to give ‘us’ more control over our lives, is deeply involved in giving presence to human beings.

Heidegger might then ask: How is it that the word curriculum gives presence to human beings? This is a significant question when we consider the impact of education on the student. What is revealed by a curriculum is, Heidegger would argue, an essentially poetic thing—at least it is poetic if we recognise the poetry of curriculum. The poetic here means a kind of existence through which humans experience a sense of mystery and the unknown; engaging in transformation, or ‘becoming’ (Standish, 2002; Young, 2002).

Heidegger then encourages a very complex way of thinking about the world. His contributions to philosophy and to education are often difficult to pin down and to agree upon. His work tends to unsettle our perceptions, to make things less clear, to shake our reason. Some teachers might welcome such unsettling, and the excitement of challenging ideas that society takes for granted; others may feel that curriculum stops making sense. Or they may feel that essential foundations of education such as social justice, freedom and the rights of the child are endangered if truth is considered relative to a cultural clearing, or if economic theory is considered one of many valid ways of explaining and guiding educational practice.

Resistance to accepting the poetry of economic thought seems reasonable enough if economic thought is proven to negatively impact on the lives of humans. However, given that there is ongoing tension between advocates for quite different educational ideologies, Heidegger does help to make sense of curriculum in a meaningful way. His themes help to make sense of curriculum as both brought into presence by humans and as bringing humans into presence. In other words, curriculum causes humans to know them ‘selves’ as human, and to guide their human-like behaviour. Curriculum reveals to us what kinds of humans we are and might be, and what kinds of different humanities might also exist. Put simply, Heidegger encourages us to become more open to existence.

The problem of defining curriculum

The obvious question to ask might then be What is curriculum? However this is a big question given the possibility that curriculum might be a ‘sum total’ of everything (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 99).

Kieran Egan (2003) provides an important critique of curriculum that might be seen to temper the influence of Heidegger. Of concern here is a loss of confidence as a
result of opening up our understanding of curriculum, and of education, to the extent that it is not possible to be familiar with our own lives, and to entertain meaningful ambitions for our societies. It is one thing to be open to difference, but quite another to accept no ideals on which to base existence. Curriculum then initiates the student into ‘a set of norms, knowledge, and skills which the society requires for its continuance’ (Egan, 2003, p. 9).

The word curriculum comes from the Latin currere and is associated with a place where something is run, for instance a racecourse (Egan, 2003). From this origin curriculum was applied to education to describe a course of study; for instance a three-year bachelor of teaching program made of 24 courses. Later, curriculum was enlarged to refer to the content of the program, the various courses and their respective content: during my studies I learn about child development, leadership, play and so on. What curriculum did not concern itself with was how the student might experience the program; what kinds of pedagogy were applied to deliver the content. For this more recent meaning of curriculum, Egan (2003) suggests we can look to, amongst others, Maria Montessori for her development of methods of teaching. We might also look to Rousseau for attention to the ways the child learns, with his methods for gently guiding the child’s discoveries in idyllic natural settings. Moreover, Rousseau gets credit for suggesting that not only is a curriculum primarily how we teach but also that the central how should be one of providing the child with freedom to follow their own inclinations.

Thus, methods and procedures become important focuses of attention for educators. Furthermore, if children will naturally choose the good given freedom of choice, then children’s own interests should be allowed to decide at least some part of what their curriculum should contain. That is, the question of what became less crucial for the curriculum designer (Egan, 2003, p. 13).

This is not to suggest that questions concerning how content is delivered had not been asked previously, rather that these questions were now specifically curriculum questions, and that the curriculum was as much, if not more, interested in how a student was introduced to, for example, theories of development, or current best practice in a centre, rather than just that they were introduced to this content. When an early childhood setting or a teacher education setting is audited by a government agency, the auditing is as much concerned with knowledge of pedagogy as with learning outcomes. An interesting consistency develops between early childhood and tertiary pedagogies wherein process is elevated in importance. A government audit is unlikely to be guided by I don’t care how they learn it, just that they learn it. (For more questions concerning the confusing of process and product, see Gibbons, 2007).

The role of the teacher becomes the popularised scaffolding adult who is ‘not seen as responsible for transmitting any particular knowledge’ (Egan, 2003, p. 14). Egan argues that teachers not being responsible for particular knowledge is partly an outcome of a lack of certainty regarding what actually should be taught in a curriculum. The glorious age of information has enlightened the teacher to the point of ignorance—she or he does not know what knowledge is worth teaching and can only hope that the child or student teacher will lead the way. Sociocultural and postmodern writers are unsurprised by this predicament and may even see it as a valued educational condition, given the educational proclivities, from the industrial revolution onwards, to stymie a child’s interests and skills in the knowledge of what is best for both child and society. Lyotard (1999) might have referred to this condition as postmodern, in that education can no longer be relied on to provide a universal educational truth, or even signpost, whether that truth defines what should be taught, or how it should be taught.

Transformative early childhood teacher education curricula

Katz (2009) identifies some overarching questions that have had an enduring quality in early childhood teacher education. These include whether teacher education should be focused on innovative or traditional pedagogical practices, whether the role of the teacher educator is to be formative or summative, or whether a program should encourage broad coverage at the expense of mastery in particular theories, subjects and/ or curriculum approaches.

That these questions continue to be asked might in itself suffice for Heidegger, who would be reasonably happy that those interested in early childhood education continued to question curriculum. However, it is probably scholarly fantasy to suggest that early childhood teacher educators live in a world of reasonable happiness. In fact Heidegger’s influence has motivated ongoing critique of teacher education based upon the perception that transformations are required to the ways we perceive and practice teacher education. Of particular concern is the possibility that teacher education focuses too much on content and too little on authenticity, presence and transformation. Emphasis on skills and knowledge at the expense of the transformative self—a self that Gloria Dall’Alba (2009, p. 34) believes is central to ‘professional ways of being’—may be ‘insufficient for skillful practice and for transformation of the self that is integral to achieving such practice’ (Dall’Alba, 2009, p. 34).

The modes of knowing that constitute early childhood education discourses shape experiences of being
human. Dall’Alba argues that ‘if we make a commitment to becoming a teacher, musician, or economist, what we seek to know, how we act, and who we are is directed by and to this commitment, which organizes and constitutes our becoming’ (Dall’Alba, 2009, p. 36). In other words, when entering a program of study that leads towards qualification to teach in early childhood education, the student is entering into an experience that will transform who they are (their who-ness). In this sense, experience of a teacher education curriculum is an ‘ontological’ experience; it affects the student’s being. Transformation requires more than simply being programmed to teach particular things in particular ways; there must be a sense of openness, that being is not predetermined by a tertiary institution, or government, and that the purpose of education is necessarily one of forming an identity (Novinger & O’Brien, 2003). Dall’Alba (2009) suggests that one’s teacher education involves a turning around through which the self is transformed. The pathway is not predetermined by the institutional curriculum, because the student arrives on the path with a past. In introducing students to new modes of knowing, each student engages in some kind of transformation, yet the nature and extent of this new formation is guided along a new, and arguably unique, pathway by the student’s past—a past that provides prior knowledge and valid expectations of what it means to be a teacher and a student (Dall’Alba, 2009).

Dall’Alba (2009) reasonably suggests that a focus on the imparting of predetermined knowledge and skills can be inflexible, simplistic and negative, with resultant concerns for the nature of a profession’s professionals. However, this does not devalue knowledge and skills, and neither should it suggest that being a transformative teacher is not related to knowledge and skills.

The problem seems to be that knowledge and skills might be applied to a teacher’s education in ways that limit questioning, inquiry, engagement, creativity and poetry. This problem has particular importance for early childhood education. In the next section this limiting is examined within the context of achieving coherence between Aotearoa/New Zealand’s teacher education providers.

The rule of coherency

In Aotearoa/New Zealand the Kane Report provides an overview of the nation’s teacher education programs. Kane (2005, p. xii) led two research questions:

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of New Zealand initial teacher education qualifications?
2. What processes are in place to ensure quality implementation of the qualifications?

The report notes that in general institutions provide ‘similar programmes of study in terms of the shape, content and organisation of the qualifications’ (Kane, 2005, p. xiii). Despite the similarities, and an acknowledgement that initial teacher education is incredibly complex and multi-faceted, a ‘lack of explicit coherence among components of many qualifications’ (Kane, 2005, p. xii) is indicative of a problem.

The report suggests that coherence is achievable and desirable, with an onus upon institutions to ‘ensure that all qualifications are built upon a strong, shared vision of good teaching practice’ (Kane, 2005, pp. xx–xxii), including the educational theories that are ‘most useful’ (Kane, 2005, p. xxii). In this way coherence of teacher education programs is identified as an issue, from the ways the programs are articulated in conceptual frameworks to the content, delivery, assessment and quality assurance. To be coherent in this sense requires an acceptance of shared values, beliefs and theories. For instance, concepts of social justice, the importance of ‘information communication technologies as fundamental cultural tools for life in the twenty-first century’ (Kane, 2005, p. xiv), the importance of teachers engaging with the foundational studies of education, or the correct interplay between transformative and informative learning, are things to be shared.

The possibility of coherence is conditional upon values and beliefs that, in early childhood in particular, are unlikely to exist, in part owing to the rapid growth of the sector in both theory and practice. For some this growth has led to decision making being informed by un-evidenced beliefs (Kane, 2005). Evidence is needed to ensure clear determinations of ‘fundamental goals’ and their effective achievement (Kane, 2005, p. xi). However, concerns might arise regarding the impact of a coherency for an arguably incoherent profession such as early childhood teaching—this is particularly the case when teacher education is significantly influenced by a sociocultural approach to curriculum (see, for instance, Farquhar & Fleer, 2007). Here ‘incoherent’ might positively means things that cannot and should not be stuck together, rather than cannot understand each other. Why should they not be stuck together?

The report’s executive summary acknowledges that the regulation of teacher education must be sensitive to the needs and expectations of teacher education institutions, teacher educators, and teacher education research. In addition, in noting that some ‘qualifications are entirely prescribed, allowing no choice of study for students’ (Kane, 2005, p. xv), the report seems to be suggesting that the presence of choice needs analysis and discussion in terms of teacher education outcomes:

This project confirms that initial teacher education is incredibly complex and multi-faceted and that qualifications reflect many of the challenges of...
implementing quality teacher education that are experienced internationally. We should embrace this complexity and seek to better understand and convey the critical responsibility that teacher educators have in the preparation of teachers for New Zealand centres and schools (Kane, 2005, p. xx).

So the challenge for both teacher education and government is to understand the meaning, application and impact of coherence. How do teacher educators know that coherence exists in relation to a course they provide (from design to assessment and evaluation), and what might they expect as an outcome of such coherence? A problem for government is the determining of a national horizon for teacher education that is suitably broad in its capacity to cope with the horizons that are closer to the lived experiences of early childhood education and teacher education.

As governments around the world implement strategies to provide more regulated early childhood education, the provision of teacher education will expand. Yet:

The increase in the number of providers and qualifications over the past decade raises questions regarding the capacity of such a system to be able to consistently provide quality programmes in the face of competition for students, for appropriately qualified and experienced staff, and for effective centre and school-based practicum placements for student teachers (Kane, 2005, p. xix).

The allure of coherence suggests some difficulties, not just for teacher educators but also for government in navigating the gaps that appear when character and coherence diverge. Fostering both diversity and coherence in an education sector is not a task for the faint-hearted. Early childhood teacher educators are often critical of increasing levels of control over the student teacher’s journey (see, for instance, Novinger & O’Brien, 2003). However, for decades prior to these interventions and regulations, governments have been criticised by early childhood advocates for a lack of interest in/acknowledgement of the sector and its value to the community. The appearance of the sector on the nation’s political radar is testimony to years of advocacy around children’s rights, support of families, and beliefs regarding the role of a professionally provided early education in engendering socially desired life chances, as well as to the revelation that early childhood education has economic value. With increasing advocacy, scholarship, research and policy comes increasing potential for debate about what can be shared regarding early childhood education and teacher education.

Implications for early childhood teacher education

There will be many ways in which values and beliefs regarding teacher education are shared. For instance, the importance of nature for Rousseau, Froebel and Steiner, or the relationship between land (whenua) and people (tangata) appreciated by Heidegger, suggests important spaces of shared understanding between continental European and Māori views of the world. However, not all Europeans have entertained the educational visions of Rousseau et al. It would be more accurate to suggest that Rousseau’s contemporaries would have regarded the educational practices of Māori as antithetical to their own, self-determined, civilised ways. Rousseau was interested in poetry, not progress.

A colonial disregard for supposedly incoherent indigenous views has had a significant impact on education. This disregard is evident in attempts to prohibit educational practices and to assume that educational values and ideas are commensurate. Such manifestations are not historical anomalies (Farquhar & Fleer, 2007); any attempts to argue for increasing coherence across teacher education providers should be carefully and critically examined, lest we forget.

Forgetfulness is a characteristic that Heidegger attributes to a modern western way of thinking about the world. In the context of education, he would point to a forgetting that schooling is not the only form of education, and a curriculum does not occur only at a school-like institution. The staggering success of schooling at convincing us (home-schoolers and de-schoolers apart, see for instance Brown, 2002; Illich, 1976) of its importance obscures other ways of thinking about education.

The arguments regarding the importance of early childhood education have, however, not yet driven out a memory of other possibilities. With so many convincing stories about the benefits of an early education in a regulated and trained setting, it may be that soon some of the poetry of early childhood teacher education will be drowned out by the noise of policy making and the certainty of scientific evidence.

The science of curriculum has evolved from concerning a program of study to the content of that program, and more recently to the ways the content is taught (Egan, 2003). This evolution has brought with it a crisis in confidence in relation to what can and should be taught in any educational environment. This is a concern for some who believe that a coherent program of teacher education will contribute to increased quality for children in early childhood education settings. However, for others this crisis might indicate the possibility that curriculum can be responsive to the many different values and beliefs present in a pluralistic society.
Moreover, it might remind policy-makers, teacher educators, and educational researchers to pay more attention to the cultural clearings in which they are present—to what they might see if they were peering from the heights of an ivory tower.

Such attention includes an increased acknowledgement of the impact of the student teacher on the curriculum. The students who choose a career in early childhood, the students who are forced to turn to study to stay in early childhood, and any other students not included in these two groups, have a ‘wide range of needs … (cultural, isolation, family commitments, resource)’ (Kane, 2005, p. xx) and have a significant impact upon the curriculum. In this sense each teacher education institution’s special character is defined not just by its leaders, its conceptual framework, its academic team, or its organisational structure; its character is special in part through the students that are enrolled, and these students are ever-changing.

The student teachers give presence to an institution’s horizons in the same way as teachers give presence to their profession. For Dall’Alba (2009) teacher education must be transformative in order to engender a strong profession. Student teachers who experience a flexible and responsive teacher education may be more likely to approach their own early childhood education environments with a sense of openness to their communities, to their families, to their children and to their profession, rather than to their theory, policy and regulation.

A curriculum can impact on a student teacher through its openness, emphasising what might be called an ethics of remembering that would involve thinking beyond the sole and the coherent. Teachers may then not assume control of language and education, and instead embrace the poetic, including the poetry of scientific and economic thoughts. Scientific, economic and technical views on education are not as bad or as incongruent to early childhood education environments with a sense of openness to their communities, to their families, to their children and to their profession, rather than to their theory, policy and regulation.

The newness of each student’s experience is unique to each student. This is especially the case with teachers who bring to their profession a vast resource of experiences in teaching and being taught. The complexity of making sense of and embodying these often disparate experiences suggests that the early childhood teacher education curriculum needs to be extremely flexible and sensitive. The curriculum must cope with its students determining pathways of teaching that are preserving the essential characteristics of a profession and challenging its nature and purpose. These are concepts aligned to the problem of schooling in a democracy—the maintenance of tradition and the scope for progress (see for instance Arendt, 1961). Moreover, these concepts align the experience of teacher education to the application of early childhood curriculum guidelines such as Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). This curriculum document defines curriculum as ‘the total sum of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster learning and development’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 99). Teacher education may need to consider how to both provide a broad scope and avoid the exclusion of environments that are not designed.

Conclusion

The point of this paper is to highlight the problem of agreement on what needs to be continued through the curriculum. For some, what society needs is children with the right knowledge and values; for others, society needs children with particular ways of thinking about themselves and about their being in the world.

In Lilian Katz’s address to the Working Forum on Teacher Education (see Katz, 2009), an important and positive presumption is made. Katz acknowledges that she cannot speak to curriculum matters outside of her context, and that it is for the listener and/or reader to make sense of her ideas in their own terms. Hence, where Katz expresses developmentally appropriate practice as innovative, it is essential to appreciate that such an expression is made within a cultural clearing and may not translate to other clearings. What makes sense in one clearing may have limited applicability in another. Even where values appear coherent, it is dangerous to presume coherence exists. Moreover, it is dangerous to assume that the language of another is not meaningful and poetic:

But if I
should not hear
smell or feel or see
you
you would still
define me
disperse me
wash over me
rain
(Hone Tūwhare, in Prentice, 2004, p. 224)

... and if I want to classify and find a term for your and our experience, it is not because I wish to destroy its beauty by generalizing it, but because
I want to describe and preserve it as distinctly as possible (Hesse, 1990, p. 259).

Herman Hesse and Hone Tūwhare provide two reminders that there are different ways to be in the world. If education and teacher education forgets these ways, the questions we end up asking in education may be dry and safe under an umbrella, yet sadly unaware of the designs and desires that preserve us.

References


Technologically constructed childhoods: Moving beyond a reproductive to a productive and critical view of curriculum development

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Many countries around the world have in place national early childhood curriculum documents for supporting educators, including Australia. It is timely for the field of early childhood education to consider the contemporary experiences of children from the twenty-first century in relation to how early childhood curriculum is framed. For instance, a technology-constructed childhood through everyday life-support technologies (in real use or through play) or a technologically driven play world that is more imagined than real (e.g. monster trucks, Xbox games) has implications for how curriculum development may be conceptualised. This paper draws on cultural-historical theory, in particular the work of Elkonin (2005), to examine how children’s everyday lives are shaped over time by the economic imperatives and social conditions which produce technologies to support families and communities. Through a discussion of an empirical study of children’s everyday lives, this paper presents a model to explain the technological diversity found across families and through this examines how curriculum may need to be re-conceptualised to take account of an emerging technologically constructed childhood.

The international curriculum context

Societies have different traditions for early childhood pedagogical knowledge and for the outcomes of learning for that period. The kinds of knowledge valued within one community may be similar or different to other communities (Nuttall, 2003). Within-community differences can also be noted, as no cultural or professional context is homogeneous (see Sumson, et al., 2009; Yeilland et al., 2008). However, the OECD (2006) in their extensive review of early childhood education and development across OECD countries sought to categorise the different ways societies think about valued forms of early learning and development knowledge. In their report, the OECD (2006) suggested that the emphases noted in curriculum and pedagogy across countries should be viewed as sitting on a continuum of broadly developmental goals to focused cognitive goals. In the social pedagogy tradition, they argued that ‘all children should develop a desire and curiosity for learning, and confidence in their own learning, rather than achieving a pre-specified level of knowledge and proficiency’ (Martin-Korpi 2005, cited in OECD, 2006, p. 60). This contrasts with what they have termed a pre-primary approach. In countries that the OECD defined as tending to use a pre-primary approach, they argued that curriculum in the early years is linked directly to the curriculum found in primary schools. Curricula are generally based on subject domains, such as literacy, numeracy, and science. Early childhood curriculum has traditionally been separated into domains, such as ‘social-emotional; physical, cognitive, language’ and sometimes ‘spiritual’ elements (see McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards, 2010). Here cognitive emphasis can also mean literacy, numeracy, science, technology, and occasionally health. The distinctions along the continuum named by the OECD allow for this kind of knowledge categorisation. In this way of thinking, more cognitively oriented programs (discipline knowledge) sit in opposition to more socially oriented programs (social and emotional outcomes). This type of categorisation uses a particular kind of binary logic (see Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). This form of logic, known as Cartesian logic (see Latour, 2003 for discussion of different forms of logic), is common in many European heritage communities. Cartesian logic would appear to have been used to analyse curriculum documents from the OECD countries reviewed. But can all curriculum documents be categorised using this kind of logic, and be placed along this kind of continuum?
When we look more broadly at countries outside of the OECD, like Russia (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2009), and we examine new curriculum development in the US (Bodrova and Leong, 2007) and in the Netherlands (van Oers, 2009), we begin to see the need for quite a different kind of framing for curriculum. The curriculum models being espoused in these countries come from a very different theoretical tradition and draw upon different logic to Cartesian thinking. These curricula would be difficult to conceptualise within the curriculum continuum described by the OECD. For instance, in Russia, the Golden Key programs use cultural-historical theory to guide their curriculum modelling and program implementation, where discipline knowledge is framed through imaginary situations, play-based programs and fairy tales within multi-aged groups. In the Netherlands, developmental teaching based on cultural-historical theory builds children's theoretical thinking in discipline areas (Davydov, 2008) whilst preserving a sense of agency through play-based programs across age spans (van Oers, 2009). In the US, teachers who use the ‘tools of the mind’ approach deliberately use ‘play plans’ to generate high order knowledge and skills in literacy alongside active development in play maturity (Bodrova and Leong, 2007). In the latter approach, cultural-historical theory has been used to sensitively re-frame the dominant tradition of developmentally appropriate practice. All of these curricula use cultural-historical theory. This theory uses dialectical logic, and unlike Cartesian logic, focuses on the complementary relations between the social and material world of play, the social, historical and material context of discipline knowledge, and active personal and social engagement of children and early childhood educators in society. In this kind of logic it is difficult to position discipline knowledge as being separate from social and personal knowledge, as the OECD (2006) has done in their categorisation of curriculum.

Internationally, we are also noticing changes in country curriculum directions. For example, in Hong Kong China, Mainland China and Singapore, scholars are developing curriculum documents which encompass not just discipline knowledge, but also goals in creativity, imagination and values for both kindergartens and schools (see Farrell, 2004; Pui-Wah, 2006; Ling-Yin, 2006; Rao and Li, 2009). That is, we are noticing curriculum models in early childhood education where there is movement towards valuing both pre-primary and social pedagogy approaches as a dialectical relation (see McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards, 2010; Fleer, 2010). These developments, especially the use of cultural-historical theory for guiding early childhood education, are signalling a global change in curriculum development in some countries, and a broader understanding of the existing cultural-historical programs, such as those in Russia, found within the international community. As curriculum moves beyond dichotomous understandings of the early childhood curriculum as either social pedagogic or ‘pre-primary’ in orientation (even when elaborated as a continuum) (OECD, 2006), it is timely to reflect on the extent to which existing ways of framing curriculum mirror how we have conceptualised children, childhood and children’s experiences of contemporary everyday life.

In this paper a cultural-historical study of children’s development through everyday life is presented, with a special focus on examining the kinds of experiences children have which are important to acknowledge in curriculum development. It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a full discussion of childhood, curriculum theory and development. As such, the focus of the discussions will be limited to childhood, and technology/popular culture, as examples of how the contexts of children and childhood have evolved historically, and how our concept of curriculum must be responsive, rather than reproductive of past practices and beliefs about children and curriculum. For example, Zevenbergen (2007, p. 21) states that ‘Those digital natives who have reached adulthood have been exposed to new forms of shopping (for example, online shopping via Amazon and eBay), interactions (online games that are linked globally) and multi-purpose tools (the telephone that is also a diary, camera, Global Positioning System navigational tool, calculator, etc). These are technologies that were not available to previous generations and hence, have created different opportunities for those for whom they are a natural part of their social world’ (p. 21). The intent of the paper is to stimulate thinking about curriculum in relation to contemporary children and childhood, and not to be conclusive or directive regarding early childhood curriculum.

In the first part of the paper an historical analysis of childhood is given, followed by a sociological discussion of childhood and popular culture. In the second part of the paper, the study design and findings are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of a model which conceptualised the dynamic technological contexts of childhood in relation to contemporary childhood. The model, as a theoretical tool, is useful in providing another viewing of childhood that is important to acknowledge during curriculum development.

**Technology-created childhood**

In this section of the paper it will be argued that technology in everyday life, and its historical evolution and transformation, have changed the position children have in society, creating a need for specialised learning institutions, and with this the need for planning learning through curriculum development (whether formalised in documents or informal through the institution or activity planned by someone dedicated to this role).
In an important set of papers by Elkonin (e.g. 2005, Chapter 2) on the origins, development and decline of play activities among children he found that, historically, a whole family unit performed the work of producing food, for example, as seen in agricultural food production. This kind of work originally only required simple tools and labour, such as digging with sticks and planting with hands. Children could participate in these kinds of agricultural activities in meaningful and productive ways, where their contributions helped sustain the family unit or small collective community. Even the youngest mobile child within a community could contribute to food production. However, in the transition to higher forms of production through the invention of new technologies, farming, hunting and fishing techniques and animal husbandry, Elkonin (2005, Chapter 3) argues that ‘a new division of labor appeared in society’ (p. 69), and ‘children stopped taking direct part in complex forms of work that were beyond their capacity’ (p. 69). Children needed more strength and skill, and extended periods of training/practising in the use of tools and techniques. This resulted in an extended childhood period of development before they could meaningfully contribute to the sustainability of the community or family unit. Elkonin (2005, Chapter 3) argues that ‘Miniature tools specially adapted to children’s capacities, with which the children practiced under conditions approximating the conditions of actual work by adults but not identical to them began to appear’ (pp. 69–70).

These arguments have also been noted in more contemporary cross-cultural studies, such as noted by Rogoff (2003) where communities expect children to participate in meaningful ways in the life of the community in order to support the survival of the family unit. In Rogoff’s (2003) research and extensive review of the literature, she found that children use real adult tools (e.g. toddlers use machetes to cut open coconuts, or use looms for weaving after a period of observation) in order to contribute productively to the family unit or community as a whole. Studies of children’s play in these or similar communities, have been undertaken by Gaskins (1999; 2007), Gaskins et al., (2007), Goncu (1999) and Goncu and Gaskins (2007), who have found that children are less likely to enter into role play or fantasy play because they are actively doing important household work. Like Elkonin (2005, Chapter 2), they also noted the special place held by children within these communities, where children are positioned as active members of the community, contributing to the survival of the family unit. In these communities, researchers have noted that children are embedded within real everyday life events, taking an active and important role, and that imagining themselves to be part of the adult world, as often happens in fantasy play, is limited.

During continued technological evolution, two further developments were noted by Elkonin (2005, Chapter 2). The first related to the need for more advanced fine motor skill and eye-hand coordination for handling these new technologies, such as the complex fishing nets that evolved over time, where young children practised knot tying with string. The second kind of development related to the appearance of symbolic artefacts or toys, which recreated aspects of everyday life, such as dolls and caring technologies, bows and arrows and hunting techniques and string games for practising knot tying. Elkonin (2005, Chapter 2) suggests that these symbolic artefacts or toys provided the vehicle for role playing important aspects of everyday life within communities, particularly as children began to have less and less direct involvement in food production. This signalled that learning began to be removed from direct participation in everyday life, and a need arose for the provision of training or for learning institutions/services to be created.

If we look closely at contemporary society, as opposed to Elkonin’s historical analysis of technological artefacts and play processes, what role do children have in contributing to everyday life? In the next section of the paper, we will briefly examine some of the literature on popular culture, in order to better understand contemporary children’s experiences of everyday life and their engagement with the technologies which surround them now.

**Popular culture**

Sociological studies of children have shown some very interesting things about how high technology is currently being used by children, but also how technology is being shaped by the business sector to create a new market specifically focused on young children (Brooks, 2008). The business sector has commissioned market research in order to understand how young children use technologies. They have found that in Western (Jipson & Paley, 2002; Kasturi, 2002; Scott, 2002) and also some Asian communities (Shon, 2002; Viruru, 2002) children are enjoying a ‘kidworld’ (Cannella & Kincheloe, 2002) or ‘Kinder-culture’ (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998) that runs covertly in parallel with the ‘adult world’ (Kasturi, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 1999; Scott, 2002). Kincheloe (2002) argues that when children are ‘[d]rawing on this technology-enhanced isolation, children turn it into a form of power. They know things that mom and dad don’t. How may parents understand the relationship between Mayor McCheese and the French Fry Guys in McDonaldland?’ (p. 103; my emphasis). Technology has created a new way of communicating, a new language for communicating, and a virtual world that groups of primary aged children (and older) share together without their families. Facebook, messaging, and particular games websites are all examples of the kinds of technological tools that children use.

The sociological research literature suggests that young children are enjoying the power of generating their own language (Scott, 2002), worldly input, and
technological knowledge expertise (as a result of being able to operate technologies more easily than adults) (Provenzo, 1998), and through this children have developed a kind of sophistication which calls into question the traditional beliefs of ‘childhood’ as ‘innocent,’ ‘cute,’ and in ‘need of protection’ (Cannella, 2002; Hendrick, 1997; Higonnet, 1998).

Kincheloe (2002) argues that marketing agencies have tapped into the younger childhood market and have deliberately generated a corporate-produced popular culture. The sociological literature names this as the corporatisation of childhood. There is now a growing number of studies that show the impact of the corporatisation of childhood. For instance, the literature suggests that there are a mix of responses to this corporatisation of childhood, with evidence of a hybridisation of cultures, colonisation and McDonaldisation.

Hybridisation of cultures: Peterson (2005), in researching consumption and identity in Arabic cultures through an analysis of Arabic children’s magazines, noted that Egyptian communities are concerned for how their children can simultaneously be modern and Egyptian. He argued that a form of hybridity of cultures prevails. For example different dress codes—such as ‘galabiyya vs. jeans and button down shirts’; or strong differences in fashion—such as ‘veil vs. the salon hair style’; or sanctioned communication or value-based protocols—such as ‘sermon vs. TV’.

Peterson (2005) found ‘the sheikh with a cell phone, the televised sermon, the veil, selected for color and pattern, as style accessory’ (p. 196).

Colonisation: Another finding from the sociological research has shown that the bringing together of different values and practices has resulted in some values being lost. This literature suggests that when one set of values is made to look inferior, that a form of colonisation takes place. That is, one set of values dominates over another set, and takes over. For example, it is suggested in the literature that the creation of Walt Disney movies (and DVDs) was based on a particular value set that positions some socioeconomic and cultural communities most favourably. For instance, ‘Disney is viewed as constructing and presenting specific, ideologically loaded stories and lessons for consumers to learn’ (Kasturi, 2002, p. 44). Through this process, it is possible that particular cultural groups become isolated, invisible or worse still, stereotyped.

Kasturi (2002) suggested that ‘the unproblematised representations of race, class, and gender in Disney ‘stories’ (e.g., movies, comics, parks)’ and on their websites (p. 45) scale up the U.S. set of highly questionable values to a global form of colonisation. She argued that ‘Disney’s power lies in this subconscious form of colonization’ (p. 43).

For example, Snow White cleans and cooks for the 7 male dwarfs. In colonisation one value set dominates and takes over another value set.

McDonaldisation: The literature suggests that the corporate sector is fully aware of the claims that are made by communities about the negative impact of ‘chains of businesses’ moving across the globe. Companies which use popular images (e.g. Disney characters) and children’s toys to sell their products (e.g. Kids meals) actively target young children. Research by sociologists into colonisation has shown that some companies employ people to specifically examine how they can make their global chain look more local. For example Kincheloe (2002) when researching McDonalds found that they had employed a staff member to specifically focus on creating a sense of individuality and giving local relevance for McDonalds in the Asian community:

The stated function of this office is to make ‘the company feel small’ despite the reality of globalization. In Beijing, McDonalds markets itself to the Chinese people not as an American but as a Chinese company (p. 87).

How does children’s popular culture influence curriculum development processes? Children bring with them into the classroom/centre these toys, their home experiences with DVDs, electronic games, and the images of characters from these toys on their T-Shirts, lunch boxes, preschool bags, shoes, drink containers, etc. Zevenbergen (2007) names these as ‘highly digitized out-of-centre contexts’ stating that these ‘new worlds of play are not restricted to the digital media since there are often vast arrays of supporting paraphernalia. Many games, such as The Sims, The Simpsons, Barbie, Pokemon, etc., are supported, for example, by television shows, magazines, websites, trading cards and feature-length movies. The young person has many avenues to explore as a result of these virtual games. Conversations in the playground can centre around the games and other supporting materials. There is an extension of the games into various play areas with children taking on the characters from their games’ (p. 26). It matters what children experience in their everyday lives—out of centre contexts. Many arguments within the longstanding (see Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990; Dockett and Fleer, 1999; Haas Dyson, 1994; Marsh, 2000; Yelland, 1997) and recent literature (e.g. Zevenbergen, 2007) can be found on whether to incorporate or ignore these kinds of experiences for contemporary curriculum planning. Clearly, technological developments and the corporate sector do not stand still (see also Woodrow and Brennan, 1999). As such, it is important to continue to identify what young children experience and to continue to ask how these experiences can inform the development of contemporary early childhood curriculum development.
Study design

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger child development research program which examines the everyday life of children (see Fleer and Hedegaard, 2010) in Australia and Denmark and a smaller study on this topic conducted at Monash University, Australia.

The focus of the study was what kinds of scientific and technological experiences do children have at home? In particular, what kinds of technologies do children use? What is the significance of these everyday technological experiences for informing early childhood curriculum?

Sample: Nine focus children from one childcare centre within an outer Melbourne suburb participated in the study. The children were aged between 1.3 years and 4.4 years, with a mean age of 3.0. All the children came from professional or trades families, where both parents worked in either full-time or part-time employment. All families were of European heritage background.

Procedure: Student teachers in their first year of university acted as research assistants as part of their studies for the unit entitled Early Childhood Science and Technology Education. The student teachers worked in teams of five, video recording the everyday technological and scientific experiences of their focus child whilst engaged in everyday life at home or in the community. The students took photographs and generated portfolios of their focus child’s everyday life at home, including breakfast routines, going shopping with their family, play events (inside and outside) at home, life-support activities (such as cleaning and cooking) at different times in the day. Each group video recorded between two and five hours of video data. Data were downloaded onto an external hard drive into projects, using iMovie to organise files (see Fleer, 2008 for more detailed discussion of methodology).

Data organisation: The researcher workshopped with the students the data generated, categorising the data in relation to the kinds of everyday technologies used and the scientific understandings possible as shown through video images of the children’s everyday lives at home. Data were put into segments (e.g. avi files) and used for further workshopping in order to map the diversity of technologies and scientific experiences that dominated families.

Only the data generated by the student teachers from the unit is analysed and discussed in this paper.

Analysis: In line with earlier work undertaken by Barbara Rogoff and her team, we were very interested to know how embedded the children were in real everyday life activities in the family home. As such, the data were organised so that both the personal, interpersonal and community/contextual dimensions of the children’s experiences were kept intact (see Rogoff, 2003). This was important for gaining a sense of the whole dynamic family context in which the child’s experiences of technology and science could be better understood.

In order to make more sense of the complex data generated, the researcher drew upon Vygotsky’s (2004) concept of imagination and creativity in order to determine the dialectical movement between reality and fantasy evident in the children’s everyday scientific and technologically oriented lives. Because these two theoretical concepts are dialectically related, they allow for an analysis which views the child’s experiences as both connected to reality (e.g. real-world embedded events, such as helping with cleaning), whilst also being abstracted into a fantasy context (e.g. pretending to be cleaning or viewing a DVD where life-support tasks are featured). In this theoretical reading, children can imagine their world through fantasy (imagination) and they can interact and create their world in reality (creativity) (see Vygotsky, 2004) (see also Fleer, 2010 for a further discussion of these concepts in relation to early childhood education). It was the relations between imagination and creativity that became an important dialectical dynamic for understanding the diverse experiences of the children at home with everyday and high technologies.

Findings

In this section, the findings of the study that are relevant to the focus of this paper are discussed. Three examples of data are presented as summarised case studies to illustrate the diversity of family practices, and to show a clustering around important themes that emerged in this study. The themes that emerged and that are discussed in this section are:

- children help their families with life support tasks and engage in leisure activities using technologies
- children are positioned as active contributors to the family unit, using real technological tools
- children are embedded within a child-centred world focused on popular cultural images and leisure technologies.

The findings indicate that first, not all family practices and children’s experiences of popular culture are the same, and second, that there are important differences between family practices which shape the kind of orientation children have towards technology. The latter has an important bearing upon our understandings of children’s contemporary lives, and what this may mean for curriculum development in the future.

Children help their families with life-support tasks and engage in leisure activities using technologies

Case example 1: Phillip and his family life.

Phillip is 4.4 years of age. He is an only child, living with his mother and father. He spends his time at
home engaged in a range of scientific and technological activities. He experiences life by using life-support technologies, such as the vacuum cleaner, kitchen tools, such as a lemon squeezer, and is involved in caring for plants, such as the lemon tree, the fruits of which he uses in cooking. He actively contributes to these kinds of activities as both a helper and as a learner. Phillip also uses high technologies, such as the Xbox, and monster toys (car and truck collection of toys), where his father actively engages in supporting his independent use of these technologies. These leisure technologies are supported by books/images, magazines and television viewing of monster trucks.

Children are positioned as active contributors to the family unit, using real technological tools

Case example 2: Marita and her family life

Marita is 2.8 years of age. She is an only child, living with her mother and father. Marita is steeped in the real-world activities of her family. Marita helps with cooking. She uses a real piano and violin for music. She uses a real camera, and she uses all of the tools used by the adults, including knives for cutting vegetables, hot water and the stove for cooking pasta, the vacuum cleaner for cleaning the family home, and the washing machine for washing her and the other family members’ clothes (with support from the adults). Her family believes it is important for Marita to use real tools and be an active and contributing member of the family unit. Marita also has access to a DVD player, DVDs and a TV. These leisure technologies are operated independently by Marita.

Children are embedded within a child-centred world focused on popular cultural images and leisure technologies

Case example 3: Beth and her family

Beth is 4.8 years of age. She lives with her mother and father. She is an only child. The house is organised so that Beth's toys and interests dominate the household spaces. Her bedroom symbolises a fairy world. Throughout the house, there are many Disney and cartoon characters scattered over the walls, windows, clothing, bags etc. Large toys and the DVD player are positioned so that there is easy access for Beth to these activities as her family undertakes day-to-day life-support tasks.

These case examples reflect the lives of the other families in the sample of nine, and are consistent with the pattern noted in the broader findings of the overarching study by Fleer and Hedegaard (2010). What we see in these case examples is how children have been positioned within their families in relation to the real, everyday life-support tasks within a family, as well as a fantasy world created through technological tools such as Xbox and DVDs. Children’s experiences appear to encompass both. The difference lies in how families position their child—as embedded within a real world, enjoying leisure activities, or as positioned more within a fantasy world relating to imaginary characters, such as fairies.

As discussed earlier, the cross-cultural research literature (see Rogoff, 2003) suggests that there are some children who are completely embedded in their community. That is, children and adults are not separated out into institutions (such as schooling, or workplaces), but rather these children have an important place within community life, contributing to many activities in meaningful and productive ways. They do not need to imagine or create a virtual world, but rather are central to family and community life. The families of the present study showed that most of the children were generally positioned to be active contributors to household tasks, helping with cooking and cleaning. Because all the parents were in paid work, whilst the children were in child care, the children did not have daily opportunities to be involved in their parents’ work life, and this contrasts with the cross-cultural studies noted in the literature.

Ethnographic evidence by Gaskins (2007) demonstrates that in some communities children are not encouraged to engage in fantasy play but rather are seen to be important and active members of the community doing real life support tasks. In contrast, the findings of the present study showed that most of the children had some family experiences of a fantasy world. However, some children were more oriented to this fantasy world than were others. That is, some of the children were surrounded by a proliferation of technological toys, DVDs, computer games, internet games sites, and handheld electronic games. This was noted in one family home in particular, where the household was set up to completely support this orientation, with media characters, virtual worlds and artefacts which replicate fictional characters. Life-support activities seemed to fit around the fantasy world that had been created in the family home. Across the nine families, this kind of fantasy orientation also featured, but its dominance within the family home was both variable and dynamic. That is, sometimes children were more oriented towards fantasy because of what they chose to do, and at other times they were active contributors to life-support tasks.

The themes noted in the data and discussed above can be shown as a dialectical model of everyday life technologies to support living (use of real tools) and technologies which help with imagining adult activities, for example a cleaning and cooking (as abstracted through toys, for example toy vacuum cleaner) or leisure technologies, such as DVDs and movies or Xbox and games. In Figure 1 this dialectical model of children’s technological orientations is shown.
In this model we can see the dynamic relations between the kinds of technologies experienced by children in the twenty-first century within a particular community within Australia. The model moves beyond a dichotomous reading of children’s technological experiences and foregrounds how a technologically constructed childhood receives meaning through children both experiencing reality and imagining reality. Whilst Elkonin (2005) has argued that historically invented technologies changed the position children held within a community and lengthened the period of childhood as they learned or practised the new skills needed to use the technologies, the study reported in this paper shows a different interface with technology. The technologies available to children today have allowed them to move in and out of reality and to move in and out of life-support tasks within the family home. Leisure technologies do not necessarily relate to reality. Life-support technologies, are generally easily managed by both children and adults (e.g. loading a dishwasher and turning it on requires very little skill or strength). Unlike the popular literature discussed earlier, which tended to examine just one dimension of children’s lives—creation and impact of high technologies on children, designed by the corporate world—the study reported in this paper sought to also examine everyday life technologies, giving a broader research framework. The dynamic mix of both embedded real-world activities and an imagined fantasy world noted for all of the nine children in this study, points to a different experience set of young children to that experienced historically. Importantly, the findings of this study, when considered in relation to recent cross-cultural studies (e.g. Rogoff, 2003), and historical studies (e.g. Elkonin, 2005), together point to an increasingly technologically constructed childhood. As with other studies that have examined how childhood has been constructed (see Cannella and Viruru, 2004; Fleer, Hedegaard and Tudge, 2009; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998), we cannot ignore this kind of reading of children’s experiences, when curriculum development is being undertaken. Curriculum development based upon this kind of conception of childhood and children would be clearly contested. However, to ignore it would serve to generate a reproductive curriculum which risks being out of step with children’s actual lives. Zevenbergen (2007, p. 20) contends that digital natives’ ‘ways of acting and being in the social world are framed by their experience with technology. Their worlds are heavily influenced by such technologies. Young children’s toys, for example, contain sophisticated technologies in comparison with their parents’ toys. One only has to consider the toys produced by manufacturers such as Mattel and the changes over the past 20 years to see how digital technologies are changing.
the experiences of young children’. Clearly more thought and research must be given to considering the outcome of this study, and the model in Figure 1.

**Conclusion**

The social pedagogy to pre-primary continuum for conceptualising curriculum development in OECD countries (OECD, 2006) allows for a particular view of social traditions or perceived skills (such as reading and writing). This conception of curriculum is too narrow to take into account the profound impact globalisation, consumerism and technological expansion are currently having on children's experiences of their worlds. It also renders invisible curriculum development processes which draw upon a cultural-historical tradition, such as the Golden Key programs in Russia, Developmental Education in the Netherlands, and the Tools of the Mind curriculum in parts of the US. In addition, a cultural-historical perspective on curriculum development makes visible the dialectical relations between the different kinds of technologies available to children in the twenty-first century, and in doing so, allows the curriculum development process to more easily respond to social change derived from technological innovation. It is only when we consider the many constructions of childhood, including the technological imperatives in children’s lives, that we can genuinely move beyond a reproductive curriculum process and into a conceptual zone which is productive and acknowledges children’s actual everyday lives.

**References**


Acknowledgments

The data generated through the study reported in this paper drew upon the study design and methodology developed by Hedegaard and Fleer (2008). It also used the same ethics framework approved by the Monash University Ethics Committee. Data generated through an investigation of the nine focus children and families was undertaken by student teachers at Monash University as part of their first year undergraduate studies. Colleagues who taught in this unit were Susie Butler, Danielle Cogley, Sue March, John Gipps and the author. Two of the student research groups were supervised by Sue March and the author, and these data are more expansive. The raw data from these two subgroups have not been used in the analysis undertaken for the paper. All worked data by the author and the student teachers being taught in their unit of work formed the basis of the data analysed and reported in this paper. Student teachers involved were: M. Costabile, A Ginsburg, F. Holden, A. Ireland, C. Murrell, B Saveneh, N. Grindle, J. Kirkham C. Muir, L. Na, R. Sugihara, E. Traigin, K. Groom, S Hubbard, A. Kemmerlings, K. Martin, K Price, A. Banks, T. Carter, S Duyvestyn, J Grafton-White, H. Jones, M. Aslam, B. Blake, C. Marmion, M. Taylor, M. Vella, N. Wescombe, C. Boehme, S. Browning, J. Cruickshank, H. Minness, J. Smitten, C. Allan, D. Buffinton, S. Connell, R. Jekatheesan, E. Slocome, R. Tierney, S. Wheatland, K. Collins, L. Echeverria, J. Muller, E. Tait, H. Tan, S. Anthony, K. Donald, J. Koop, S. Hee Lee, A. Otto, S. Pang, and S. Wootton.
Rethinking Sponge Bob and Ninja Turtles: Popular culture as funds of knowledge for curriculum co-construction

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CHILDREN’S INTEREST IN POPULAR culture was clear in my study of interests-based curriculum. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, it was a contentious site of curriculum co-construction. This article explores this tension. It argues that interpreting popular culture as ‘funds of knowledge’ might assist teachers to consider a different view of this interest and its potential for curriculum experiences. Examples from four-year-old children and their teachers at a sessional public kindergarten are discussed. Changes in teachers’ understandings and practices related to popular culture, that may have transferability to other settings, are described.

Introduction

Building curriculum on children’s interests is an established practice in early childhood education. Yet little research has examined the nature of children’s interests and whose and which teachers choose to build curriculum. This paper reports on one aspect of a study of interests-based curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Hedges, 2007). ‘Funds of knowledge’ (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005a) formed a conceptual framework to explain children’s interests. From a sociocultural perspective, I argue in this paper that viewing popular culture as funds of knowledge may be a way for teachers to engage meaningfully with children’s interest in media-based culture.

Literature review

Sociocultural perspectives of knowledge

Sociocultural perspectives of knowledge are described as knowledge founded on the social values and history of a culture, and the underpinning beliefs (Case, 1996). Sociocultural theory represents various viewpoints and inspires researchers to extend their methodologies and interpretations (Rogoff, 1998). Sociocultural approaches to research study learners’ participation in activities that involve both the contributions of individuals and those of other people, cultural institutions and artefacts.

Two major branches of sociocultural theory have been identified. The first, commonly known as sociocultural or social-constructivist, emphasises language and forms of understanding embedded in social and cultural contexts, relationships and practices. The second is that of cultural-historical activity theory. This theory emphasises practical activities and cultural practices in shaping learning. Both branches have developed Vygotsky’s seminal ideas by enabling researchers to focus on sociocultural activity as the unit of analysis and emphasising the learning inherent in any context. More recently, Fleer (2010) uses the term ‘cultural-historical theory’ to bring together salient aspects of both theories and the conceptual learning potential of children’s play. Sociocultural/cultural-historical theories accentuate the importance of recognising and building on children’s family and community learning and knowledge.

Further, culturally valued knowledge is commonly defined within knowledge domains such as literacy, numeracy and science. Wood (2009) provides a vignette that illustrates the broad extent of children’s domain knowledge related to fire-fighting gleaned from a television program, Fireman Sam. The prevalence of television programs, movies, computers, advertising, toys and artefacts aimed at children has grown rapidly in the past 20 years (Kincheloe, 2002; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004).
Given that sociocultural perspectives view learning as socially and culturally situated and mediated, popular culture and associated technologies are elements of children’s everyday life experiences (Marsh, 2005; Zevenbergen, 2007) that have become a ‘media-created electronic ZPD’ (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004, p. 14). Research has demonstrated how incorporation of aspects of children’s popular culture experienced at home can be used to motivate and extend children’s literacy learning in the centre setting (Arthur, 2001; Marsh, 2000). Marsh’s study utilised children’s interest in the television program Teletubbies to extend and promote participation in language and literacy experiences.

However, teacher beliefs are well established as an influential construct on approaches to education (Pajares, 1992; Raths, 2001). Teachers’ own experiences of play and their beliefs about popular culture are likely to be influential on how popular culture is engaged with in curriculum. Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003) found that some teachers perceived their own experiences of play as the ideal and that contemporary play, such as watching television or using computers, was ‘dangerous’ (p. 5). Sandberg and Vuorinen (2008) also established that teachers believed popular culture limited children’s play. Similarly, Zevenbergen (2007) illustrates how young children’s experiences with technology-related popular culture are vastly different from those of their teachers, recommending that early childhood pedagogical practices be re-thought to take account of these changes.

The belief that popular culture has a negative impact on children’s learning and behaviour appears to have become widely accepted within early childhood education. Children sense this from teachers and parents. Consequently children may become secretive in carrying on play influenced by popular culture, while teachers struggle to consider how best to respond (Giugni, 2006). Marsh (2005) notes that causal claims, such as that playing violent computer games leads to violent play and behaviours, are yet to be supported by research evidence. She further argues that such discourse requires challenging as teachers consider how popular culture affects children’s lives. A rethinking of popular culture is therefore proposed in this paper.

**Popular culture as ‘funds of knowledge’**

González and colleagues (2005a) developed from Vygotskian and sociocultural theoretical perspectives a positive view of the diverse everyday knowledge and experiences found in families in their concept of ‘funds of knowledge’.

*The concept of funds of knowledge ... is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge* (González et al., 2005b, pp. ix, emphasis in original).

González et al. define funds of knowledge as the bodies of knowledge, including information, skills and strategies, which underlie household functioning, development and wellbeing. These may include information, ways of thinking and learning, approaches to learning, and practical skills. Examples include shopping, meal preparation, socialising with wider family and community members, and participation in sports, music and art activities. Moll (2005) makes an important proviso relevant to this paper. He notes that the concept is dynamic, as it changes and evolves with new circumstances and cultures. Popular culture was justified as funds of knowledge in my study and re-thought as a site of curriculum co-construction.

**Methodology**

My study of interests-based curriculum included exploration of the following questions:

1. In what ways do teachers recognise and engage with children’s interests in relation to children’s experiences and funds of knowledge?

2. How do teachers choose whose and which interests will be engaged with in building a sociocultural curriculum during both planned and spontaneous teaching and learning interactions?

I used qualitative, interpretivist approaches (Flick, 2006). The main data generation technique was participant observation in children’s natural learning settings for an extended period. Field notes recorded evidence of children’s interests and inquiries and how children’s interests were enacted, recognised and engaged with by teachers. Interviews, facilitated inquiry sessions with teachers, and curriculum documentation were further sources of data. Children’s and parents’ perspectives were incorporated through interviews undertaken in family homes. Ethical principles according to the criteria of the approving university guided the conduct of the study, alongside attention to the complexities of engaging with human participants, particularly children aged less than five years.

Children’s references to popular culture were the most numerous in my data. At first, I simply analysed popular culture as one of children’s interests. However, a closer examination revealed that children’s interest in popular culture was not often about popular culture characters, scripts or games per se. Interpreting the data from a sociocultural perspective enabled me to recognise that popular culture represented something that influenced children’s language, play, relationships and behaviour in ways consistent with the concept of funds of knowledge. Findings in relation to popular culture at one of the case settings, Takapuna Kindergarten, are reported in this paper. Takapuna Kindergarten was a sessional (half-day attendance) public kindergarten...
for three- and four-year-olds. Three teachers and 45 four-year-old children attended the morning session I participated in each week for one year.

Findings

Children's interest in popular culture

Children often brought items to the kindergarten that represented their interests, such as books, toys and photos. This was an established way in which teachers recognised and acted on children's interests. However, sometimes items brought from home were not acknowledged in any depth, particularly if they represented popular culture; for example, a toy from a current movie. Such items were brought out at group times but commonly returned to children's bags afterwards rather than utilised as part of the curriculum.

In play and conversations, children revealed the sources of popular culture interests as including television programs, movies, technology-based games and fast-food restaurants. Popular culture provided a unique way for children to transform participation in activities. Specific examples related to boys' dramatic play as superheroes and the physical exuberances and skills involved. Their knowledge of characters, roles, vehicles, clothing and the rules of these games were consistent.

Showing evidence of the power of merchandising, many children brought drink bottles with characters such as SpongeBob Squarepants (SBSP) printed on them. Originally containing sugary drinks, these were sold at cafés and supermarkets and were a good size for re-use as water bottles. Continuing with the example of SBSP:

Tom's friend proudly shows me a sticker he has on his tee-shirt of SBSP. He tells me he had to go to the doctor to get some eye drops and he got this for being brave.

A student teacher left a gift after her practicum—a SBSP memory game. Children often chatted together about television programs or DVDs of SBSP they had watched recently. Children's conversations about planned birthday celebrations frequently involved fast-food restaurants or themed parties or cakes—Tom planned a SBSP one.

Sewing capes became a long-term project at the kindergarten. This was initiated by Ben, who wanted to have a cape similar to those worn by two other boys at the centre. The teachers took pains to tell me that Ben's motivation was about becoming friends with these boys, not to acquire a superhero identity. However, much of the subsequent play enacted by children who made capes utilised scripts and themes from popular culture.

Several families mentioned children's watching television and videos at home. For example, during the family interview, Leah and Greta's mother spoke about the influence of television on the children's play and language, including their use of American accents. Leah and Greta's imaginative, dramatic play at kindergarten often reflected popular culture characters and themes, and understanding of family roles and responsibilities, testing out fears and risk-taking dispositions.

Popular culture: A contentious site of curriculum co-construction

Despite its popularity with children as an interest, popular culture was a contentious site of curriculum co-construction between children and teachers. It has long been recognised that as young children process the wide range of information and experiences they are exposed to they often transform them in ways adults view as inappropriate (Corsaro, 1985). Children's play and conversation influenced by popular culture was often deflected or diverted by both children and teachers. Children then waited until the teacher had left to resume their play.

Tom and two friends are playing with Mobilo. Trevor tells me they are playing Ninja Turtles and building planes that will shoot boomers out of the sky at baddies. Christine approaches and asks about their construction. She talks to them about transformers that change capability. Gary tells her they are boomers.

Christine asks what it booms out and Gary responds: Poo.

Christine: That'd be pretty messy; who's going to clean it up?

Gary: The robot.

Christine: Couldn’t it boom out something more interesting, like chocolate? She leaves.

After a small period of silence, Gary says: Guess what I’m making, Thomas?

Tom: What?

Gary: A transformer.

The only occasion I noted in which teachers used popular culture positively in their interactions was as motivation for locating particular fish species during an excursion. This example relates to the movie Finding Nemo.

Outside is an aquarium, and Christine has asked the children to spot Nemo and Dory. Shannon spots Dory and points her out to me; a friend helps him find Nemo at the other end.

Closer examination of the data suggested that children's interest in popular culture was not always about popular culture per se, but about the funds of knowledge-related actions, behaviours and values gleaned from
Theresa: … we’ll say okay for this child because we know them so well, here is the big grey area … so for me then, using the child’s centre of interest to build the curriculum for them is I’m going to use what you’re interested in to build this whole [child]. … The interest is the vehicle then to make the learning happen.

In this way, and in keeping with previous studies (Arthur, 2001; Marsh, 2000), Tom’s and Gary’s interest in Ninja Turtles was used to extend them in literacy.

Theresa tells me they made a book last week; they drew lots of Ninja Turtles pictures, told a story which they wrote, and spiral-bound it. They each took it home to read with their parents.

Discussion and implications for practice

Using popular culture in curriculum

Corsaro (1985) pointed out that adults often dismiss as unimportant what they do not agree with or understand about children’s behaviour and interests. The process of challenging teacher beliefs about popular culture may, as in this instance, best come from teachers reflecting on evidence of their own practice. Teachers might be encouraged to analyse children’s interest in popular culture in a more meaningful way in order to engage with children’s underlying inquiry into what characteristics and qualities make a well-rounded, contributing member of a family, community, culture and society. Teachers can use popular culture to develop children’s funds of knowledge in the centre setting.

Moreover, perhaps teachers might be helped to realise that their own childhood experiences are very different from those of the children they teach. Sandberg and Pramling Samuelson’s (2003) study is evidence that some teachers may need to confront and re-examine their idealised beliefs about play. Basing their beliefs and values on negative views of technology, or interpreting children’s interest in popular culture disapprovingly, ignores the reality of children’s lives that teachers purport to seek to engage with.

Advertisers and marketers have connected children to the power of popular culture; it is up to adults to use this productively to assist children’s opportunities to learn. Alongside evidence of extending children in knowledge domains such as literacy, children learn about physical and emotional wellbeing, identity and making sense of the world and its people. Teachers might then also be able to engage in discussions with children about issues related to identity, fairness and justice on which popular culture may encourage a focus, such as gender and gendered roles and expectations, ethnicity and equity, using critical theory (MacNaughton, 2009). Later in children’s schooling, discussions about notions of

...
democracy, citizenship, corporatisation, globalisation, consumerism, resources and power could be related to their early experiences with popular culture.

**Conclusion**

Sociocultural perspectives view learning as socially and culturally situated and mediated. Active participation in learning experiences enables children to participate increasingly effectively in their communities. Reflecting on data generated by a researcher, teachers in this study of children’s interests gained a different insight into the concepts of popular culture and funds of knowledge that altered their teaching practices. Thomson (2002) provides two hypothetical cases of children about to start school, detailing their ‘virtual school bag full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live’ (p. 1). Thomson shows how the culture of the school determines whether or not the child gets to open the bag and make use of its contents. I have argued that early childhood teachers may need to examine their beliefs and practices in relation to popular culture in light of contemporary childhood experiences. Viewing popular culture as funds of knowledge from a sociocultural perspective might enable early childhood teachers to engage productively with children’s technology-based interests. If teachers overlook children’s interest in popular culture, they may be ignoring a rich source with which to engage and extend children’s knowledge and understandings.

**References:**


Introduction

The research this article is based on was an investigation into the nature of children’s independent collaborative play. I was interested in how the play began and developed, the themes and activities within the play, how leadership was expressed, how conflicts arose and were resolved, and why some children's efforts to move into existing play episodes were successful and some were not. An area of particular interest of mine (e.g. Mawson, 2002; Mawson, 2003a; Mawson, 2003b) is to understand and encourage children’s technological experiences in early childhood settings, and this aspect of the research is the focus of this article. I first describe and discuss the technological knowledge and understanding exhibited in the independent play of three- and four-year-old children in two early childhood settings, a sessional kindergarten and an all-day centre. I then address the implications of this information for early childhood teachers’ technological subject knowledge.

The importance of early childhood teachers having domain knowledge is now well established. It was identified as one of the seven pedagogical principles of quality teaching in early childhood settings (Farquhar, 2003) and was one of the four specific areas of focus in round two of the Ministry of Education's ECE Centres of Innovation strategy. There has been an increasing call for early childhood educators to increase their subject content knowledge and to move to a constructivist pedagogy (Backshall, 2000; Cullen, 2003; Fleer, 1993; Garbett, 2003; Garbett & Youn, 2002; Hedges, 2000; Hedges, 2004; Rodd & Savage, 1997). Hedges (2004) suggests that a lack of emphasis on subject knowledge can no longer be justified in early childhood education in New Zealand.

There is a fear that a focus on subject knowledge will undermine the holistic approach of early childhood education. Traditionally the knowledge base of early childhood teachers was focused on material from the child study movement and developmental psychology, and content knowledge was not valued. Experiences in mathematics, science and technology have been regarded as less critical to children’s development than are play-based experiences. This has been related to prior negative experiences and a lack of confidence in their own knowledge in these areas by many early childhood teachers (New, 1999). Certainly teachers have an important role in influencing children's dispositions toward learning in these areas.

There is a strong focus on children's interests in planning and assessment in early childhood education, and in New Zealand the cycle of ‘notice, recognize and respond’ underpins this process (Carr, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004). Knowledge of children’s interests, and developing working theories as expressed in children’s
independent collaborative play, can provide greater information for curriculum planning, particularly in the field of technological experiences.

Young children come into early childhood settings with rich prior experiences that they use to develop and increase the complexity of their play in the early childhood setting. During their collaborative play scenarios the children incorporated a wide range of technological knowledge and understandings gained from their out-of-centre experiences. These technological references provide insight into the content knowledge needed by early childhood educators and offer some possible avenues of interest that might profitably be explored within an extended learning experience.

**Methods**

The overarching purpose of the two case studies was to investigate the nature of children’s independent collaborative play. In order to reduce the number of variables that might influence the play I chose two centres that had a different organisation and teaching philosophy, but were similar in terms of teacher experience and qualification and the children’s ethnicity and socioeconomic background.

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. However, the teachers in the daylong centre were heavily influenced by the philosophy and practices of Reggio Emilia. The daylong setting was open from 7.30am until 6.00pm and catered for children aged from six months to five years. It was licensed for 10 children under two years and 27 children over two years, but, as not all children attended every day, there were actually 50 children enrolled in the centre. The children were predominantly of New Zealand European ethnicity from middle-class families. There were 31 boys and 19 girls on the roll, the ethnic composition being 44 NZ European/Pākehā children, two Māori children (NZ Indigenous people), and one Cook Island child, one Malaysian child, one South African child and one Swedish child. The children in the centre were organised into three separate groups, babies (0–18 months), toddlers (18–36 months) and children aged three and four years.

The research in this centre involved the three- and four-year-old group. At various times in the daylong setting 22 children were participants in the research project. Initially there were 15 children (six girls, nine boys) in the group. During the year three children left to go to school as they turned five, 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 for a total of 17 1/2 hours, and a group of 45 three-year-olds who attended for three afternoons in a two-and-a-half-hour session. Children entered the afternoon session at about three years, two months of age and moved into the morning session at about four years, two months. The roll was made up of 50 boys and 40 girls. Although still heavily weighted toward European/Pākehā children, there was a more varied ethnic group within the kindergarten than in the daylong centre. The ethnic composition was 68 NZ European/Pākehā, two Māori, 10 Chinese/other Asian, three Indian children, and the rest African, Fijian, Iraqi, Italian, Samoan, Tongan/Niuean, and Turkish (one each).

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).

In both cases I spent one morning a week from the beginning of March until the end of November in the early childhood settings. When an episode of collaborative play began I recorded it. 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) were used to identify collaborative play experiences.

My role was purely as an observer; I did not participate in any of the episodes observed, nor did I interact with any of the children involved. Only those episodes that arose from the children’s own interests were observed. 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 in any way. During 2007, 85 episodes were observed in the daylong 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. While a substantial amount of video was taken in the daylong setting (26 hours), this was not possible in the kindergarten because of the difficulty of avoiding filming non-participant children. Not all episodes that occurred were recorded. While observing inside I could not monitor play 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.

**Analysis**

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 (e.g. blocks, home area). Other categories emerged from analysis of the data itself. Examples of these were leadership styles, friendship groupings, communication strategies and intervention strategies. The episodes are coded as D (daylong centre) and K (kindergarten) and are numbered in the chronological order they occurred during the data collection period. The findings are presented in terms of the three strands of the Technology Learning Area in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Ethical considerations

Research with young children poses a number of important ethical issues that need to be addressed. Although the children, aged three and four years, were unable to give fully informed consent, which was gained from the parent/caregiver, care was taken to explain to the children in terms they could understand what was being observed and to make clear that they could ask not to be observed at any time. I also looked for non-verbal indications that children were withdrawing their consent.

The research had ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee and the Auckland Kindergarten Association Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms are used for all children in this paper.

Findings and discussion

Technological practice

Although a similar frequency of independent collaborative play was observed within the two settings, there was significantly more technologically oriented play in the daylong centre. This would appear to be linked to a greater focus on investigation, exploration and project work in this setting compared to the practice in the kindergarten. The Reggio influence in this centre would seem to be a major factor in this difference.

There were two significant contexts that encouraged the development of a technological process where an outcome was purposefully pursued within dramatic play. These were the sandpit and the block area. Sixteen episodes provided clear evidence of children establishing a purpose or intention, planning and collecting resources, evaluating the developing outcome and extending and modifying it, and a showing a sense of satisfaction at the completion of the play episode.

The block area inspired the creation of complex constructions that provided the setting for the dramatic play scenario. The stages (D1), houses (D4, D16, D49), hospitals (D68), zoos (K43), and factories (D56) built by the children provided the focal point for the stories played out in them.

A typical example is provided by this edited play episode (D4) of Mary and Jane. They moved into the block area with a number of toy animals in their hands.

Mary said: ‘We need a home for the animals.’ [Establishing the purpose/intention]

Mary went behind the ramps and over to the block shelves, took out a long block and brought it back, then began building a wall on the other side of the ramps. [Collecting resources]

Young children prefer to plan orally and to develop their design as they work through the making process (Mawson, 2002). This was evident in this case. As they began to build the house they continually developed, evaluated and modified their plans.

‘Do this, here?’ Mary asked, picking up two ramps and placing them side by side. [Planning]

Jane picked up one of the blocks from her wall and said: ‘No, we don’t need these.’

‘We need these off,’ Mary said, and she and Jane began dismantling the wall.

‘We just need these ones, eh,’ said Mary. ‘And we don’t need these,’ said Jane, dragging both ramps away from where Mary was sitting.

‘We are making a better one; we don’t need these,’ said Mary, moving a cube-shaped block away. They continued to build the enclosure, adding rooms as they went.

Jane knelt and grabbed hold of one of the ramps: ‘Let’s just move this.’ [Evaluation and modification]

‘Yes,’ said Mary.

‘This is the two bedrooms,’ said Jane.

‘And this is the two living rooms,’ said Mary, putting a wooden cube into the enclosure. She stood up. ‘This is the house.’

‘Yes,’ said Jane, moving one of the ramps over to Mary.

‘And there’s the TV,’ said Mary.

‘Yes,’ said Jane.

When they finished the building they made a final assessment as to whether the house met their original intentions, with Mary saying: ‘This is a good building, eh?’ (08/03/2007).

A technology process could also emerge from children’s imaginative view of the potential of common resources. Some large cardboard cartons had been given to the kindergarten that morning and, when Sarah spied them, she said to Patsy, ‘Let’s make cars.’ [Establishing purpose/intention] They each got a cardboard carton and, after opening out the bottom [Modification] climbed inside and stood up, holding the cartons under their arms. ‘We need
a steering wheel and seat belt,’ said Sarah, and the two girls got out of their cartons and went inside. They came back with paper plates, string, glue and Sellotape™. [Planning, gathering resources] They glued the paper plates onto the front flap of the carton to act as the steering wheel, and Sellotaped™ the string from one side of the carton to the other to act as the seat belt. [Making the desired outcome] Patsy started to walk around the kindergarten, ‘driving’ her car’ [Testing outcome] and Sarah called out to her ‘You haven’t got your licence. Patsy, you need to come home and get your licence.’ [Technological knowledge of systems] They proceeded to use their cars to go from home to the library and the shops. Patsy’s string came unstuck and she looked very sad and said, ‘I can’t get my seat belt on.’ Sarah came up and looked at the problem and went and got some more Sellotape™ to re-secure it [Failure analysis]. The two girls played with their cars for nearly an hour until tidy-up time [Satisfaction with fitness of purpose of outcome] (Episode K13, 18/04/2008).

Teacher content knowledge includes knowledge and understanding of the technological process. In order for teachers to effectively enhance children’s technological practice they need to understand the activities involved within a technological process. Two aspects of the process are particularly important as sites of meaningful teacher interaction with young children. These are planning for action and evaluation of the end product. The nature of children’s planning and the role of the educator in early childhood settings has been clearly identified by Ann Epstein.

Planning is more than making choices. Planning is choice with intention. That is, the chooser begins with a specific goal or purpose in mind that results in the choice ... When we engage children in planning, we encourage them to identify their goals and consider the options for achieving them. For example, they might consider what they will do, where they will do it, what materials they will use, who they will do it with, how long it will take, and whether they will need help. Planning thus involves deciding on actions and predicting interactions, recognizing problems and proposing solutions, and anticipating consequences and reactions (Epstein, 2003, p. 29).

Helping young children evaluate their technological outcome requires teachers to understand the concept of fitness of purpose. The role of the educator is to help a young child reflect on the degree to which the outcome meets his or her original intention/purpose and to help the child develop ideas about how the outcome could be modified to more closely satisfy his or her needs if that is what the child desires.

**Technological knowledge**

The children’s play embodied a strong awareness of the various parts of the medical system. The children regularly explored the roles of doctors and nurses and hospitals. They incorporated syringes (D7, D11, D68), bandages (D68), and ‘medicines’ (D11, D56) into the play in appropriate contexts. The role of ambulances (D50) and hospitals (D57, D59, K7) were explored as the play developed.

A typical example of the doctor scenario is this excerpt from episode D11. The children were involved in a family dramatic play involving Mum (Jenny), big sister (Marcia) and a doll representing the baby.

Marcia looked at the doll and said: ‘I hope she’s not sick; the doctor’s not coming.’ Jenny picked up the telephone and said: ‘I’m calling the doctor by myself. Bye, bye, doctor.’

Alister had been standing watching the play and Jenny said to him: ‘You can be the doctor; baby’s got a sore arm.’

Marcia said: ‘We just need to put a bandage on it, don’t we?’

Alister responded: ‘Now you stop bleeding.’

Marcia picked up a spike for putting accounts on from the light table and gave it to Alister, saying: ‘This is the needle.’

Alister said: ‘The baby’s got poison,’ and, picking up the doll, injected it in the heel with the bill spike.

Jenny added: ‘We need to make it clean.’

Alister: ‘I need the medicine pouch.’

Jenny responded: ‘Marcia has the pouch.’

Marcia handed the bag representing the first aid kit to Alister who said: ‘Oh, thanks, Maddy.’

The roles now changed as Jenny said: ‘We’re doctors, aren’t we?’ and Marcia responded: ‘Yeah.’ The three children were now all working on the baby.

Jenny: ‘I’ll help you get the splinters out.’

Marcia: ‘I’ll do it a bit.’

Alister: ‘I think she’s all right.’

The children then moved back into the family play incorporating runaway kittens as other children joined in (Episode D11, 22/03/2007).

A second area of consistent interest was the world of transport. Ambulances (D50), buses (D51), police vehicles (D14, K6), systems (keys, D33, seat belts D33, K6) and maintenance (oil, petrol, tyres, D28, K6, K29) of motor vehicles featured in dramatic play scenarios. The children took great pains to ensure that their ‘vehicles’ were operated in a manner consistent with the adult world. The following exchange comes in the middle of a complex game of police, firemen and baddies that six children were playing outside in the kindergarten. They have just come back from chasing the baddies. They sit in the car they have made by placing six chairs and a large box behind the
steering wheel mounted on a portable frame that is part of the outside equipment.

Sarah: ‘To our car quickly, seat belts on.’
Jim puts his helmet in the last container making up the car saying: ‘That’s where we put our stuff.’
Sarah: ‘Guys, seat belts on quickly. Seat belts on.’
Allan: ‘I’ve got my seat belt on.’
Jim: ‘Where are we going? Are we going to Africa?’
Sarah: ‘We’re going to Africa.’
Allan: ‘There’s lots of baddies there.’
Jim: ‘Stop the car!’
Sarah: ‘Seatbelts off. We have to lock this.’ She ties up the steering wheel and they leave the car (Episode K6, 04/04/2008).

The third area where the use of technological systems was explored was that of information and communication technology. Computers (D7, D38, D41) and mobile phones (D56, K12, K15, K56) were incorporated into the play in ways that mirrored their use in the wider community.

The gendered imbalance of early childhood educators would suggest that educators’ knowledge and understanding of the children’s medical and health interests is likely to be greater than that relating to the car and transport interests. In order to build on the children’s interest in transport, educators may need to develop their own knowledge base so that accurate information can be provided to extend and enrich children’s play with appropriate adult interventions.

Children have had myriad experiences with the health system and health practitioners, and are very aware of the nature and use of a wide range of medical technologies. Similarly, they are often very proficient users of a wide range of information and communication products in their daily life. Talking to children about these experiences will provide educators with insights into the range of content knowledge needed to develop and support experiences that will build on the children’s knowledge and interest.

The nature of technology

This is an aspect of technology that may need a greater proactive approach from early childhood educators, as it is a key element in developing a critical technological literacy. Although the children were constantly involved in exploring adult roles, they did not explore to any great extent the wider ramifications of technology on their lives in their collaborative play. There was some understanding of the way seatbelts had improved people’s safety in cars and of the need to use them, even in pretend situations. The impact of medicines and medical technologies on the health and daily lives of people was another area in which the children’s developing understanding of the social effects was evident. The children also naturally incorporated a wide range of information and communication technologies and references to popular media into their play.

There are two main areas that educators need to have awareness and knowledge of in order to be able to help children explore the issues related to their play themes of transport, health and mass media. The first of these is the physical and functional nature of the technological outcomes the children are referencing in their play. What are they made of? How do they work? The second area concerns exploring why people have made these products and how the products have affected our daily life.

There are schools of thought that link television advertising of fast food to growing child obesity and television viewing to children’s increased violent behaviour and lower levels of physical fitness. If these claims are valid then it would seem very important for educators to equip children with the skills to critically analyse the messages given by the popular media and to make informed judgements as to how they accept or reject these messages.

A critical literacy program in an early childhood setting could include consideration of globalisation, consumerism, cultural hegemony, racism and gender (Diaz, Beecher & Arthur, 2007). It is very difficult for educators to do this unless they are familiar with the movies, computer games, television programs and advertisements that young children watch. Being familiar with the programs and advertisements gives early childhood educators the chance to talk about these things and their subliminal messages in the many informal conversations which are a feature of early childhood education, but which rarely happen in primary and secondary schools. Educators will also need to include texts of popular culture in the early childhood setting so they can engage children in a critical analysis of the messages within them.

**Conclusion**

In order to build a curriculum based on children’s interests, two elements need to be present. The most important element is the ability of the early childhood educator to accurately identify the child’s real interest (Hedges, 2007). The second element is that the educator has sufficient personal content knowledge to be able to effectively encourage and enhance the identified interest. A major challenge is the amount of subject content knowledge that is needed. This is particularly difficult in technology, which encompasses the entire made world and involves both practical and theoretical perspectives. This article has suggested that the themes of children’s independent collaborative play provide an insight for curriculum planning for early childhood educators. An understanding that children will often be using a recognisable technological process in their dramatic play allows educators to...
incorporate technological experiences into their planned program and to make explicit to the children the various aspects within the process. The focus should be on aiding children’s planning and evaluation.

Three areas of particular interest have been identified from the analysis of the independent collaborative play in the two early childhood centres where the reported research took place. These were health and medicine, transport systems, and information and communication technologies. Listening to children talk about their own experiences with the health system will give educators an initial list of things they need to be knowledgeable about and suggest related areas that could be explored with the children. The importance of these interests is recognised in *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), one of the learning outcomes being that children develop knowledge about the role of the wider world of work, such as the hospital, the supermarket, or the fire service’ (p. 56).

Knowledge of the forms of transport the children have experienced or are interested in is another starting point. Exploration of local public transport systems is one way links can be made with the wider community and children’s life outside the centre. Suggestions have already made with regard to appropriate areas in which children’s critical literacy could be developed.

As a sociocultural approach to assessment gains ascendancy in early childhood education (e.g. Ministry of Education, 2004) there appears to be a tendency for early childhood educators to view children’s learning predominantly through a social or dispositional lens. Much rich learning in technology, science and mathematics would be revealed in learning stories or if similar narrative assessments were viewed through a subject-oriented lens by teachers who had appropriate in-depth subject knowledge. Although this research has offered some initial insights into children’s technological interests and suggested areas for teachers to develop their own technological knowledge, it is clear that this is an area which demands further research.

References


Introduction

The Australian children’s television program *Play School* spans more than 40 years of early childhood experience within Australia, and a retrospective view of the program highlights the emergence of different philosophical and pedagogical perspectives that impact on early childhood practice. This paper outlines the processes behind the production of *Play School*, the philosophical foundation for the program, and more recent considerations in response to contemporary perspectives in early childhood education. As for educators working in other early childhood contexts in Australia, the members of the *Play School* production team are also challenged to deconstruct past practices and interrogate uncontested assumptions about childhood experience. The complexities and contradictions which emerge offer new possibilities and challenges to explore.

Play School

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television production, *Play School*, began in 1966 and continues to be produced and screened nationally on ABC television. The national broadcaster is a preferred source of children’s television. Kym Dalton, Director of ABC television, commented in the ABC Media Release: ABC TV Most Successful Ratings Year Ever, December 2008 that, Among children aged zero to four ABC1 achieved the highest audience of all Free To Air networks and Pay TV channels in the Monday to Friday children’s TV slots (Dalton, 2008). *Play School* is broadcast Mondays–Fridays on ABC1 and ABC2 and is a significant aspect of childhood for many young Australian children and their families.

Recent anecdotal evidence supports the observation of Clark (1992) that there is also frequent use of the program within childcare settings across Australia, to replicate home-like experiences, and to give fresh input relevant to the age group in a way that does not place significant demands on staff. In either the home or in more formal educational contexts *Play School* has made a significant contribution to the experience of early childhood for young Australian children. *Play School* is also much revered within the broader Australian community. The inclusion of an exhibition documenting the history of the *Play School* program at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra affirms the unique status of the program. Carter, curator at the museum, stated that *Play School* has ‘a place in the national psyche, and so, rightly, in the National Museum’ (Carter, cited in Martin, 2002). Australian
actor Noni Hazlehurst commented, ‘It’s lasted because it works’ (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1996, p. 22). Although proud of its longstanding tradition, *Play School* has continued to evolve and change during its 45-year history.

As with other aspects of early childhood education and care, knowledge of child development and the recognition that young children learn through play and active participation (Fleer et al., 2006), have been crucial to the production of *Play School* since its inception. These considerations are evident in a number of ways, such as the personalised presentation, the use of familiar toys, program content and production techniques.

The personalised style of the program is demonstrated by the two presenters, generally one male and one female. Presenters talk directly to and ask questions of the child viewer, and this has been shown to result in greater attentiveness (Noble, 1979). The two presenters invite participation in a range of experiences and activities including singing, moving, playing, listening and constructing. Luke (1990, p. 56) noted that ‘children are able to interact with the presenters and activities by talking to the screen, clapping hands, singing or dancing along with a song.’ The child’s playful responses to the various elements of the program are encouraged during the viewing period and for subsequent further exploration. Martin (1993, p. 124) advised that child participation is sought and that *Play School* tries to encourage the idea that things can be invented and used in a variety of ways. There is no right way or wrong way to do it’.

The familiarity of presenters and the personalised nature of the dialogue on *Play School* have meant that many of the presenters have become trusted and loved friends of young Australian children. Presenters on the program have commented on the high degree of connectedness between child viewers and themselves, as demonstrated by children during live concert performances. The toys featured in *Play School* are also much loved. Big Ted, Little Ted, Jemima and Humpty are familiar characters to many young Australian children.

Early childhood practitioners provide an outline of ideas for each program, and early childhood advisers contribute insight to children’s interests based on their years of professional experience working with young children in childcare and pre-school settings or in tertiary settings. The choice of program content is influenced by developmentalist perspectives.

Each weekly series of the program focuses on a particular theme. Themes are selected for their relevance to the audience of young viewers and for their potential to be explored in infinite ways. Within each open-ended theme, other sub-themes are also explored. For example, the series ‘Frogs’ explored the sub-themes of movement; colour and pattern; what’s for lunch?; noises and music; and habitat. The program typically includes 10 to 12 linked segments, including the regular features of each program: the toys, the story, the calendar, the ‘through the windows’ film, and various play and creative experiences.

Developmentalist perspectives have also influenced program production techniques. Singleton-Turner (1994), working in children’s television for the BBC, outlined the importance of developmental psychology in determining the appropriateness of production techniques for use with young children. His discussion included a number of relevant considerations such as the adoption of a straightforward approach, ensuring that shots are kept uncluttered, and that zooms and unmotivated pans are avoided. Such recommendations have been reflected in the *Play School* program. Research by Noble and Duck (1986), involving the observation of children viewing *Play School* within childcare settings in NSW, found that the appropriately paced format and the absence of a multitude of quickly shifting stimuli enabled children to pay relatively focused and consistent attention to the various program segments. Luke (1990, p. 55) noted that the absence on *Play School* of quick jump cuts from one scene to the next more closely matches the child’s tempo in processing information. Until late 1999, each episode of *Play School* was also filmed as a continuous recording in an attempt to ensure realistic continuity. Production techniques used in the program have traditionally focused on simplicity in response to developmental expectations.

**Choices and challenges**

While retaining many of the best-loved characters and program elements, *Play School* has been modified and refined over its history in response to changes within early childhood education and within the broader Australian community. Over the past 10 years episodes of *Play School* have been influenced by, and reflect, contemporary approaches within early childhood education and are responsive to the increasing engagement of young children with information and communication technologies.

In 1999, and again in 2007, the *Play School* team sought advice regarding current developments in early childhood education. Members of the production team, including scriptwriters, outliners, producers and props designers, met to share some of the recent developments. These meetings provided the opportunity to explore the historical roots and ongoing potential of such an iconic and well-loved program which seemed to fit within the framework proposed by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999, p. 34): ‘As part of
the exercise of thought, dominant discourses and the constructions and practices that they produce can be challenged and spaces created within which alternative discourses and constructions can be produced and new boundaries created'.

The role of early childhood adviser to ABC *Play School* during a period of significant change in terms of the constructions of childhood, early childhood education, and within the public broadcaster is an interesting process. In particular, grappling with the implications of the new sociology of childhood (Christenson & James, 2000; James & Prout, 1997), the provocation of the Reggio experience (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and the reconceptualising childhood debates (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al., 1999) in relation to a national television program for young children is stimulating and thought-provoking. The shift within the ABC to a greater focus on entrepreneurial activities and developments in information and communication technologies creates ongoing challenges for the program. The recent Federal Government initiatives in early childhood care and education, and in particular the National Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), (Commonwealth Government of Australia [COAG], 2009) provide new opportunities to highlight the program’s potential for supporting play, development and learning.

*Play School* is a significant aspect of early childhood experience for many young Australians and it is important that there is a conscious awareness of the nature of the discourses of childhood it perpetuates. Explicit consideration needs to be given to the implications the program has for Australian children and their families in their increasing diversity. Time also needs to be allocated to explore opportunities to reconceptualise discourses of childhood that will enable children’s potential to be optimised and ongoing social inequities to be challenged. Pinar (1994) wrote that reconceptualising begins with critique, analysis that does not reify existing situations but transforms them. Cannella (1997, p. 161) agreed, stating:

Reconceptualisation requires a collective dialogue in which we openly share our values, our aspirations, or visions for a new beginning. In a world in which equity is of great importance, reconceptualisation would involve sharing our beliefs and biases openly, respecting and valuing multiple realities and possibilities and constructing a collective vision for action.

During the collaborative process of developing a series of programs for *Play School* aspects of the discourses guiding program development are identified, explored and at times vigorously debated by participants, including scriptwriters, outliners, producers, executive producer and advisers. At times decisions have to be made on the basis of practicality of filming and production, and at times economic considerations limit the possible options that can be explored. However, there has been a commitment to consider the implications inherent within the words and phrases, experiences and images used, and to grapple with the power of this medium to influence the experience of childhood for young Australian children. Participants in program development residing in urban Sydney have been challenged to consider how the diversity of Australian childhoods is represented and which are marginalised or omitted. Mackinley and Barney (2008) highlighted the depiction of Indigenous perspectives on the program and the ongoing complexity of reflecting the diversity of contemporary Aboriginal cultures and languages. This paper provides an opportunity for further exploration of the possibilities, complexities and contradictions involved in translating new ways of looking at childhood into effective television for children and families within a diverse Australian society. The following key elements are explored:

- challenging the developmentalist discourse
- re-imaging the young child as strong and capable
- challenging the adult/child dichotomy
- socio-constructivist views of learning
- spontaneity and creativity
- valuing diversity and difference.

**Challenging the developmentalist discourse**

As previously outlined, *Play School* has been founded on a developmentalist discourse. In *Television and the developing child—focus on Play School* (Early Childhood Unit, ABC 1979), members of the Early Childhood Unit at the ABC outlined the rationale behind the program. ‘Everything in the program, the ideas, the words, the style of the performance, [and] the way in which the program is made, is done as closely as possible to the developmental level of the four year old and to assist her development’ (p. 2). Similarly, in a paper entitled *The role of the early childhood adviser in children’s television*, Martin (1993, p. 115) described her role as a resident four-year-old, reminding other members of the production team of the perspective of a four-year-old child. She elaborated by saying, ‘The main task of the adviser is to present the viewpoint and likely responses of a pre-school child, in order to brief the members of the production team, to communicate as clearly as possible the very young child’s state of being, general developmental level, competencies and dominant interests—the essence of the pre-school child’.

The powerful influence that the developmentalist discourse has had on early childhood education is acknowledged in the literature (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Graue & Walshe 1998; Woodrow, 1999). Cannella (1997, p. 59) suggested, ‘…consistent
with positivist views of the world as scientifically discoverable truth, the truth for childhood has been grounded in the belief in universal human development and predetermined environmental experience.' Dahlberg et al. (1999, p. 43) proposed an alternative view:

From a postmodern perspective there is no such thing as ‘the child’ or ‘childhood’, an essential being state waiting to be discovered, defined and realised. Instead there are many childhoods, each constructed by our understandings of childhood and what children are and should be.

Castagnetti and Vecchi also noted, ‘We have to look at children with different eyes and a different mind, curious to encounter them in their field of action, to grasp their unknown or unusual nuances (which are many) with the aim to offer back to children a picture of many identities’ (1997, p. 96). The EYLF (COAG, 2009, p. 9) also recognises that children and childhoods are both diverse and complex:

Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond preconceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child’s unique qualities and abilities.

Although developmental considerations continue to provide a general guide for script development and the choice of experiences to be included, participants are challenged to go beyond simplistic assumptions regarding the notion of the ‘universal child’ moving through developmental stages at the same rate and in the same way. There is a conscious commitment to greater consideration of the diversity of development, of learning styles and sociocultural contexts in which children live and learn. Members of the Play School team increasingly recognise that different children will respond in different ways from that presented; that what is familiar to one child will be alien to another; and that which will be easily understood for one will be beyond the comprehension of another. Children are trusted to form their own meaningful connections between various elements and experiences without the presenter attempting to make everything plain from an adult perspective. For example, whereas the narration for the ‘through the windows’ films was in the past heavily scripted to provide an running commentary on what was seen, more recent films have less narration, recognising that different children will connect with different aspects of the film in ways that are personally relevant and meaningful.

Therefore, while acknowledging developmental considerations, the Play School team explores ways the program can be responsive to the richness and the diverse experience of childhood. The EYLF emphasises the importance of the lived experiences of children noting that, ‘being recognises that the significance of here and now in children’s lives. It is about the present and them knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life’s joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life’ (COAG, 2009, p. 7). The Play School production team’s commitment to reflecting the realities and complexities of children’s lives means there are times when the program steps outside what might be considered developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The sensitive reading of the book Old pig (Wild & Brooks, 1995), for example, enabled the inclusion of the experience of death, loss and grief in thoughtful recognition of the multiple realities and complexities of children’s lives (Silin 1995).

Re-imaging the young child as strong and capable

As has been the case in other aspects of early childhood education (Fleer et al., 2006), the domination of the developmental discourse resulted in a deficit view of the young child. For instance, the Early Childhood Unit at the ABC (1979, p. 2, stated:

The mind of the four year old is very different from an adult’s mind. Her perception is very literal. Her frame of reference is patchy and insecure. She is struggling to make sense of her experiences. She does not have a very long concentration span, seldom able to follow a narrative thread, she does not relate what is happening to what has happened, does not understand cause and effect in a story. Most four year olds are fairly limited and literal in their vocabulary.

Assumptions regarding young children as ‘little’, ‘not yet able’, and simplistic in their understandings have been increasingly challenged in recent times. In contemporary approaches in early childhood education the developmentalist discourse is tempered by greater awareness of the complexity and diversity of childhood experiences. The young child has been increasingly re-imaged as strong and capable and able to construct knowledge, identity and culture (Edwards et al., 1998; Dahlberg et al., 1999; COAG, 2009). This commitment to children’s agency is endorsed by the EYLF in which young children are characterised as unique and complex, self-directed and self-motivated, able to form opinions and able to express ideas and preferences (COAG, 2009, p. 4).

Children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to other’s learning. They recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their own learning.

The image of the child as strong and capable is evident within the Play School scriptwriting process. For example, there is a commitment to the inclusion of
what might be unfamiliar and more complex language within the program. This is at times debated during program development; however, such opportunities are increasingly included, explored and embraced. In such situations a range of visual, gestural and contextual cues are used to help the young child to make meaning and support the inclusion of more complex language.

Tidhar, researching television literacy of pre-school children in Israel, also emphasised aspects of development which resulted in a deficit view of the young child: ‘Due to their incomplete cognitive and emotional development, children differ from adults in the way they process and interpret television content. Some limitations to which young viewers are subject may lead them to misinterpretations of program material’ (1996, p. 12). While not disputing progression in viewing literacy, a more contemporary view of young children would suggest that the increasing capacities of the viewing audience is both a consequence of context as well as development. Similarly, the assumption that cognitive and emotional development follows a predetermined course and is incomplete in childhood and, by inference, complete in adulthood denies the complex reality of individuals, families and communities. Rather than interpreting childhood in terms of deficits, aspects of childhood can be recognised as particular audience attributes that require specific programming considerations, just as for any other program with a targeted audience. Re-imaging the child as strong and capable is now explored in the processes of production, program development; however, such opportunities are provided opportunities to explore new possibilities within the program. The use of body language, gesture, facial expressions and movement as well as verbal communication supports the complexity of the communicative process of the young child and recognises that communication is multi-dimensional and interactive. There is also respect for the children’s ability to make their own meaningful connections, and children are trusted to establish their own links within the program and from the program to lived experience. Malaguzzi’s description of children supports this new awareness:

They are autonomously capable of making connections from their daily life experiences through mental acts involving planning, coordination of ideas, and abstraction. Remember meanings are never static, univocal, or final: they are always generative of other meanings. The central act of adults, therefore, is to activate, especially indirectly, the meaning making competencies of children as a basis of all learning (cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p. 81).

This is evident in links into and out of the ‘through the windows’ films and in the invitations out to the audience. Rather than needing to formalise the connections between segments and to elaborate and offer explanations, much is left open-ended for children to make diverse connections and links to their own realities. Many ideas are left for children to play with in a multiplicity of ways, questions are left open-ended, and possibilities are suggested but left for later contemplation and exploration rather than needing to always be worked through and explained by the adult presenters. There is also greater recognition that experience cannot simply be organised into the binary of active versus passive, with young children learning only through active physical engagement. Active engagement with content can be physical, intellectual, and/or social as children interact with the experiences included within the program in ways that are personally meaningful at other times and in other places. Play School offers a springboard into other events and experiences in children’s lives at home and in the broader community.

The image of the child as strong and capable includes greater recognition of the diversity, complexity and richness of childhood experiences. Presenters, producers and directors challenge each other to look beyond the child within the urban context, perhaps as reflected in their own experience, and to challenge commonly held assumptions and stereotypes about the lived experiences of children. Given that the program is screened nationally and that the Australian population and landscape is characterised by its diversity, it is a complex and challenging task to imagine the hypothetical child/children for whom the program is designed. The Play School team work together and seek external expertise from different cultural and minority groups to try to ensure that different elements.
of the program are used effectively to ensure greater inclusiveness.

**Challenging the adult/child dichotomy**

Cannella (1997, p. 43) has argued that:

*Childhood is created through a discourse of adult/child separation. This dichotomy denies knowledge(s) that are constructed and possessed by those who are younger. The concept privileges adult knowledge as what the child will eventually learn and places children in a position to be controlled. We must only expose them to what we deem to be appropriate. Younger human beings are further silenced by the creation of the adult/child dichotomy.*

The dialogue of the presenters within each program is used to challenge the adult/child dichotomy and the inherent power relationship it perpetuates. There is a commitment to resist portraying the adult as an expert who knows all and who is always right. Both the verbal and nonverbal interactions of presenters operate on the basis of mutuality rather than a paternalistic or didactic approach to the interaction with the child viewer. A respectful and responsive relationship between child viewer and adult presenter is therefore promoted. This reflects the quality of relationships recommended in contemporary early childhood research (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Yelland et al. 2008) and in the EYLF (COAG, 2009).

The dialogue between presenters, although scripted, reflects spontaneity and playfulness, and options are explored and sometimes pursued, sometimes discarded. For example, the craft segments or ‘makes’ that feature within each program can be less involved and more *ad hoc*. Objects and resources are frequently chosen somewhat randomly from an array of materials or an overflowing ‘useful box’ of recycled and craft materials—the suggestion being that a number of alternatives could be used. Trial and error is often demonstrated and adults are frequently seen observing and gaining ideas from each other in the process of co-constructing knowledge rather than demonstrating prior knowledge and expertise. Mistakes and misadventures, such as items falling down or paint dripping, are more frequently included as evidence of the realities of playing and exploring rather than cut in an attempt to produce a more ‘perfect’ program.

In an adult-dominated program it is essential to continue to look for ways to challenge the adult/child divide. Cannella (1997, p. 60) emphasises that ‘... within adult constructions of dominant knowledge the lived worlds of children and the knowledge that they possess are ignored and denied.’ Although the program is delivered by two adults, and occasionally three, there has been an attempt to recognise and reflect within the program, the reality that children possess knowledge and valuable insights. Within the script, pauses are used to allow children time to interject a response or comment acknowledging that they have valid contributions to make. This timing is also used to suggest that the adult does not always know but has to stop and think, or collaborate with his or her peer/s, in order to proceed. Recent ‘through the windows’ films frequently focus on authentic reflections of children’s lived experiences, with the director inviting the child to share his or her own story or experience rather than responding to a predetermined film script.

The adult/child dichotomy is also subverted by the inclusion of adults who act in playful, expressive and childlike (though not childish) ways. The apparent spontaneity also suggests the sharing of power and decision making between the two presenters and is used to establish a collaborative, interactive and reciprocal exchange. A hierarchical process of decision making, where one presenter appears to have greater expertise or power, is avoided.

**Socio-constructivist views of learning**

The apparently spontaneous banter between presenters within each episode of *Play School* has been used to emphasise that learning happens within and through relationships and that knowledge is co-constructed within the social context. Discovery is portrayed as a collaborative process with a play partner, and peer scaffolding is frequently demonstrated in problem solving (i.e. ideas generated by one presenter are taken up and built on or elaborated by the other presenter). The collaborative process between presenters takes more time than the instant solution, and this gives the child viewer more time to consider alternative possibilities before a solution is offered. A wide range of resources is also available on the set to suggest alternative possibilities, choices and options rather than giving the impression that there is one right way always predetermined by the adults. For example, two presenters working through a range of options and possible solutions solve the problem of a river that cannot be crossed. Their collaborative efforts result in a flattened box bridge. A socio-constructivist perspective offers the child the possibility of exploring options, to produce alternative solutions or constructions before encountering an adult-determined or scientifically accepted result.

**Spontaneity and creativity**

During the program there is a strong focus on familiar resources, recycled materials that may be readily available within the home. This is intended to encourage children to make their own spontaneous connections and to explore the creative possibilities of household materials without requiring adult direction and decision making, or needing the purchase of a particular product. The focus on playful interactions and more haphazard making of props for play has been consciously utilised to emphasise the creative
process and that recycled and household objects are ideal resources for play and learning. Recycled materials predominate, and novel resources or commercial products are avoided. The level of expertise required to produce the props for play is therefore minimised. For example, a sock becomes a sheep without needing buttons for eyes, other facial features or a woolly body. The sock is given life and character and becomes a partner in play by the dramatic animation and voice of the presenter. The child’s spontaneous participation is thus supported, with little being required in the form of additional resources or adult direction (Harrison, 2004). The minimal requirement for resources supports the immediacy of the child’s engagement in the program. The intention of the program is to open many possibilities so that children can be empowered to respond in the moment, as well as to see potential for play and creativity in familiar objects, resources and situations.

**Valuing diversity and difference**

The *Play School* production team is committed to affirming and valuing the cultural, linguistic, family and socioeconomic diversity of its audience. As in other contexts of early childhood experience, the challenge of inclusivity is significant. The EYLF also notes that living with diversity and difference brings with it great responsibilities and challenges. ‘Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences’ (COAG, 2009, p.16).

Within each episode of *Play School* there is a conscious attempt to share power and decision making between the male and female presenters in order to challenge stereotypical roles. Gender roles within the family are explored, with men in nurturing roles and women in physically active and challenging roles. The recent inclusion of two male presenters within the one episode provided an opportunity to explore the different dynamics that emerge through different combinations of gender. The toys are also used to challenge bias. For example, the female toy Jemima is often cast as the adventurous risk-taker undertaking experiences such as hang gliding and mountain climbing. The gender of key characters and heroic figures within the stories is also monitored to ensure that a gender balance is maintained and that stereotypes are challenged rather than perpetuated.

Although selected for their acting ability, the presenters’ diverse identities are reflective of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Australian community. Anecdotal evidence indicates that children form connections with presenters of similar appearance and ethnic identity to themselves. The use of signing as an integrated element within some programs reflects the diverse forms of communication and highlights the power of visual communication through facial expression and gesture as well as sign.

The inclusion of diversity in the context of play can provide a point of reference for ethnically diverse, single parent, blended, gay and lesbian families as well as nuclear family structures. Family diversity has been reflected within a play sequence involving a single-parent family looking for rental accommodation, the reference to ethnically diverse families living in a block of flats, and families of various configurations living in different housing situations, including a caravan. Images of a Mardi Gras in Rio De Janeiro were included in a ‘through the windows’ film and followed by a dramatic play sequence in which the toys enjoyed dressing up and making floats. The inclusion of the ‘going to the fun fair’ segment, providing an authentic depiction of a gay family, generated much controversy. However, in line with the Early Childhood Code of Ethics (ECA, 2007), and the EYLF (COAG, 2009) the program is committed to the rights of children and challenging stereotypes and bias. As the EYLF (COAG, 2009, p. 7.) asserts ‘Experiencing belonging—knowing where and with whom you belong—is integral to human existence. Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community.’ The *Play School* team continues to explore ways to validate and honour the diverse and authentic experiences of childhood within the Australian context.

**Conclusion**

Working with ABC *Play School* is a privilege as well as an exciting challenge. As with other sectors of early childhood education, the team at ABC *Play School* continues to engage with the complexities that come with change. The new national directions in early childhood care and education offer opportunities to explore as the program considers its response to issues of social justice, the developments in information and communication technologies, the role of the media in children’s lives and its impact on young children’s health and wellbeing. The exercise of deconstruction and reconstruction of *Play School* outlined in this paper will continue within our rapidly changing and increasingly globalised world. Early childhood educators are encouraged to take a closer look at *Play School* and join with Australian children and families as they take up the invitation to ‘Open wide and come inside. It’s *Play School*’.
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The Swedish National Curriculum: 
Play and learning with fundamental values in focus

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IN SWEDEN, EARLY CHILDHOOD education is unique in its combination of learning and play, care and fostering fundamental values. The aim of this article is to discuss and problematise current Swedish research from the early childhood education field with a focus on play and learning in relation to three fundamental values affirmed in the Swedish National Curriculum. These values are children’s rights, gender equity, and education for sustainable development.

The Swedish National Curriculum

The Swedish National Curriculum for the Preschool determines curriculum for all early childhood settings in Sweden (Ministry of Education & Science, 2010). The Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for the educational system from preschool to university. Swedish preschools are available for children aged one–five years and are used by 82 per cent of the country’s children (National Agency for Education, 2009). All Swedish childcare settings are called preschools.

There are two staff categories in Swedish preschools: preschool teachers with a university degree and day care attendants with a high school degree. The school system in Sweden is goal-based with a high degree of local government responsibility. The overall national goals are set out by the Swedish Parliament and the Government, in the Education Act (Parliament), and the Curriculum (Government), respectively. The curriculum should be seen as a framework and guidelines that give direction to the work of early childhood settings. Democracy is the foundation for all activities. The inviolability of individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equity between genders, and solidarity with the weak are values to be promoted in everyday learning. These principles are built into care and education, with learning and development going hand in hand. Children are described as individuals with competence—active children with experience, interest, knowledge, skills and competence that should be the starting point for everyday activities in early childhood settings. One significant aspect of the Swedish National Curriculum is that goals are to ‘strive for’ rather than ‘goals to achieve’ (Ministry of Education & Science, 2010). In this article, the fundamental values of children’s rights, gender equity and education for sustainability are discussed in relation to current Swedish research from the early childhood education field, with a focus on play and learning.

Play and learning

The new 2010 Swedish Preschool Curriculum emphasises the significance of play for children’s development and learning. Earlier in Swedish preschools, play and learning were separated. Play had no special significance for learning. Nowadays it is acknowledged that learning takes place in early childhood settings and not only when children start school (Johansson & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2006; Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008; National Agency for Education, 2008). Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) argue that play and learning are inseparable dimensions in early childhood contexts. Sandberg and Vuorinen’s (submitted) study emphasises that young children themselves make
no distinction between play and learning. Schoolchildren, however, do differentiate between learning, as something that happens in the classroom, and play, which occurs during lunch breaks and perhaps in physical education classes. The idea of playful learning in the classroom may come through in children's descriptions of teachers' attitudes. A teacher who uses humour and is able to be playful with children contributes to making school learning more enjoyable. It is argued that playful learning in early childhood education can also lay the foundation for more children to succeed in school.

Research also shows strong connections between the quality of play in the preschool years and children's maturity for following school instructions (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Malone & Tranter, 2003; Russ, 2003). These studies found that teachers achieved the best educational results when they focused on supporting children's play. Children in playful classrooms acquired literacy skills and concepts of a higher level and developed more advanced language and social skills. They also learned to manage their physical and cognitive behaviour. In classrooms where play was not incorporated, teachers had problems such as classroom management and decreased interest in reading and writing.

By supporting play without dominating or disrupting it, teachers can aid children's learning and development (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Malone and Tranter (2003) claim that play is not only a pleasurable activity but also a process through which children learn. Play supports problem-solving abilities and creates opportunities and situations where children can experiment and be creative. Teachers in Bodrova and Leong's (2003) study reported that they held firmly to the theory that children learn through play.

Research has also been conducted into children's concepts about how teachers relate to play. In a study by Sandberg (2002), children aged five–nine years expressed a range of ideas about teachers' contributions to play; for example, solving conflicts, keeping track of the rules, giving practical and moral support, or being a substitute friend.

Making friends is a significant aspect of play for children. Friends are important, as children become conscious of themselves through others. In play, children become aware of themselves, the wider society, and their membership of groups. It contributes to the foundation of the child's moral stance and personality. Mead (1995) considers that interplay with others and taking different roles within play are foundational for children's development.

Teachers and friends have important roles when it comes to children's learning. The interaction and cooperation between them is vital for both the individual and the group's values (Mead, 1995; Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). Learning is seen as serious, and teachers now (maybe more than ever) have social pressure on them to spend more time teaching specific academic content, such as writing and reading exercises and language exercises (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Research concerning early learning and development has shown that, when children are supported in their play, it affects learning in positive ways (Johansson & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2006).

How do children experience play? According to a study by Vickerius and Sandberg (2006) involving children aged three to six, play has significance because it is pleasurable. In this study children said the pleasurable things about being in preschool are playing and being creative, with the most boring thing being made to do something they do not want to, or having no-one to play with. Play as pleasure appears constantly in the literature of play (see for example Garvey, 1990). Another significance of playing with other children is that children learn to be together with others. In interplay between children, the significance of play is to make friends. Friends are important for children, and the majority of the children in an early childhood context gain the friendship of one or more of the children in the group (Jonsdottir, 2007). In Sandberg and Vuorinen's (2006) study of 86 children aged three to 12 who were interviewed about play and learning, it was found that social skills are the focus of learning both in preschool and school. This may be because it is essential for children to learn the social rules of conduct in order to gain access to joint play with other children. Children tend to be well aware that lacking ability to utilise the unspoken social rules within the group can lead to exclusion from the group. Younger children speak in terms of learning to abstain from mistakes, such as teasing and fighting and directly excluding someone from play. Older children talk more in terms of what characterises cooperation in play, since teamwork, joint decision making, empathy, mutuality and turn taking are described as important features when co-existing with others. Several of the children also stated that they develop their play skills by participating in play. These skills might involve the ability to maintain and develop play. As well, their social skills are mainly developed when interacting with other children. The joint play between children can thereby be seen as important from this aspect. Furthermore, the children generally tend to ascribe great importance to play with children of a similar age.

Johansson and Sandberg (2010) studied how preschool teachers and preschool student teachers perceive the concepts of learning and participation. The study shows that preschool teachers consider the concept of learning and its application correlates to the approach formulated in the preschool curriculum that learning is an interaction with others. Not many of the student teachers reflected that learning involves development of morals and values. This was somewhat unexpected because those aspects of learning are stressed in the preschool curriculum. This paper now discusses three underpinning values of the Swedish Preschool Curriculum.
Value: Children’s rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children have the right to be involved and to be heard in matters that affect them, and that education is to consider the children’s perspective, give children a voice, listen to them and take them seriously. Seeing the child as competent enough to express her or his meaning is very important in allowing mutual recognition and respect between professionals and children (Bae, 2004). The Swedish Preschool Curriculum states that the influence of the child should shape the learning environment and the planned activities in the early childhood context (Ministry of Education & Science, 2010). The purpose is to give children the opportunity to develop understandings of democracy, to take part in decision making, and to take responsibility for their own actions and the environment. In Karlsson’s study from 2009, children showed that they can take responsibility for everyday matters, both on their own behalf and on behalf of others. In some play situations, for example, children often overlook a disturbance by another child. They may also, for another child’s benefit, abstain from what they are doing.

Taking the child’s perspective in an early childhood setting means creating daily teaching practices that are in agreement with children’s ways of thinking and communicating (Johansson & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003). By paying attention to children’s own ways of expressing their meaning and ideas, early childhood professionals can develop their understanding of children’s perspectives (Johansson & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003). Nevertheless, several Swedish studies show that the possibilities of children influencing the preschool’s everyday practice are quite small (Johansson & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003; Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003; Emilsson, 2007; Sandberg & Eriksson, 2008). Emilsson (2008) raises three aspects in acknowledging a child’s perspective. First, the teacher should strive for closeness to the child’s perspective by seriously trying to interpret the child’s actions and sayings; second, they should aim for emotional presence by the teacher; and third, the teacher should act with playfulness. These three aspects are supported by an action research project in 10 Swedish early childhood settings with the purpose of increasing children’s possibilities to participate and to define new methods to develop child participation in the preschool. In this study, preschool professionals participated in joint lectures, cross-setting seminars, focus group discussions and tutorials, which increased their awareness, resulting in significantly changed views about children. Preschool professionals developed skills in seeing children as capable individuals with competence to participate in decisions and to make their own choices in play and other activities (OMER, 2010). Listening to children’s voices can make the learning environment visible, with the practical work in early childhood settings built on interaction and communication between professionals and children (Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008).

Value: Gender perspective on play and learning

In Sweden, discussion and legislation regarding gender equality has had a prominent place in the political arena since the 1960s. The development of early childhood education in the country was one part of an overall equality agenda that made it possible for parents to both work and have children.

As discussed earlier, all Swedish early childhood education should be in accordance with the fundamental values upon which Swedish society is based (Ministry of Education & Science, 2010). Two of these values are equality between the genders and equal rights of all people. They indicate that girls and boys should have the same opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interests without limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles and patterns. Accordingly, early childhood professionals should work to counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. But how is this perceived and handled in everyday practice in Swedish preschools?

At the end of the 1990s, the Swedish Government received indications from early childhood professionals and researchers that the work to promote equality in early childhood settings was proving to be a difficult process. Instead of challenging traditional notions of gender, early childhood professionals were actually contributing to them in many different ways. Therefore, the Government funded a gender pedagogue education program in 2002. The goal was to educate early childhood professionals with special knowledge about gender theories and to provide a variety of tools to improve quality processes. The idea was that all municipalities in Sweden should have trained gender pedagogues. At the beginning, there were just a few applicants showing interest in attending the courses, but this changed and in the last year of the program there was great interest. The Government also decided to constitute a ‘Delegation for Equality in Preschool’ in 2003. Its task was to give financial support to a range equality projects in Swedish early childhood settings. Thirty-four preschools received project funding during 2004–2005. While the Delegation was working with these projects, the first national Swedish evaluation of the preschool curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2004) showed that the work towards gender equality was barely reported among early childhood professionals and preschool directors. This started an official educational debate, the ‘General Guidelines and Comments on Quality in Preschool’ from the National Agency for Education (2005) that identified the need for a gender perspective in the everyday work.
of the preschools to be emphasised. ‘It is important that preschool staffs are actively working for equality between girls and boys... and discusses how the educational environment can be designed to strengthen gender equality work’ (National Agency for Education, 2005, p. 29).

In the government report from ‘The Delegation for Equality in Preschool’ (SOU 2006, p. 75) the overall conclusion was that early childhood settings in Sweden were ‘gendered’. Girls and boys were still considered and treated as different categories and the professionals were acting out stereotyped roles and patterns that maintained gender boundaries instead of improving gender equity. The knowledge gained from the 34 gender projects showed that the overall project was a useful method to improve gender equality. The conclusions from the project can be summarised as follows:

■ Each professional needs to analyse her/his own understanding of gender from an early childhood education perspective.
■ Different forms of documentation from a gender perspective provide a deeper understanding of daily practice.
■ Each professional needs to develop knowledge about gender theories and connect these theories to preschool activities.
■ They need to reflect on this knowledge in a wider context, from historical, cultural and global perspectives.
■ Team meetings within preschools are needed that embrace critical reflection on practice.
■ Engagement at both a local level (in the preschool) and the decision-making level (municipalities and directors) is necessary.
■ Documentation in different forms, such as recording and observation through to analysis and evaluation, are needed to develop a deeper understanding of practice.
■ Regular development of practice by systematic quality work is required.
■ Teachers need to be patient, because systematic quality work must be ongoing for a long time.

Australian studies on gender in early childhood education have also highlighted the difficulties in encouraging work towards gender equality (gender equity) and non-traditional practice (Yelland, 1998; MacNaughton, 1999, 2000, 2006; Davies, 2003).

New gender research in Sweden

In a recent research project (Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2010) interactions in four preschools were analysed to identify how preschool teachers work to counteract traditional gender patterns and roles, and how these were perceived and handled in everyday practice. The findings indicate that the concepts of gender patterns and roles were problematic, and that the professionals had different understandings of these concepts and how to put them into practice. As revealed in focus group interviews, a common rhetoric about improving gender equality was noticed in all four preschools. In video and audio recordings to stimulate discussion, activities and language showed gendered constructions in which both early childhood professionals and children were active. This was more or less visible in all the preschools, depending on the awareness of the staff. In one of the preschools, for example, a preschool teacher talked about mindsets and attitudes towards gender:

I do not see the work with gender equality as a project that we are running, I think it is a mindset that we have... it feels like you think in a different way now, more like an attitude than a project, that’s what I’m thinking (Preschool teacher).

This shows that a shared knowledge and understanding about gender structures is important within preschool teachers’ teams to construct a practice with possibilities for children to deviate from stereotyped gender norms.

In another Swedish research project, dimensions of learning and play were analysed through interactions between early childhood professionals and children, and also between children and children (Årlemalm-Hagsér & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2009). The central finding from the analysis showed that different gender patterns appear in everyday activities. These patterns can be presented in four themes: separation, constancy, community, and breaking borders. In the first theme, separation, masculinity as a superior position is realised in different ways in everyday life in preschools. Boys, for example, get more attention from early childhood professionals than do girls. In the second theme, constancy, stereotypical gender structures are strengthened by early childhood professionals' traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. The third theme, community, illuminates children's care for each other, acting responsibly and helpfully. In the fourth theme, breaking borders, stereotyped gender patterns were challenged and reformulated. These four themes illuminate different constructions of gender patterns, in which both children and early childhood professionals were active in different ways. Mainly, it was the children who challenged prevailing structures, while early childhood professionals acted more within gender stereotypes. As construction of gender permeates all aspects of everyday life in Swedish preschools, listening to children’s own understandings of gender in everyday activities can shed light on hidden structures and stereotype actions that are invisible for the early childhood professionals (Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2006).

Working with equity in preschools seems to be a gender-blind practice, as it is regarded as neutral (we don’t treat
children differently) or natural (girls and boys are different). However, the children themselves displayed a wide range of positions in different situations (Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2006, Årlemalm-Hagsér & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2009; Eidevold, 2009).

Playing in the outdoor environment is an important part of Swedish preschool settings and it provides a range of quality experiences (Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2006), but it is not gender-neutral. Ånggårds (2009) study about children’s play in nature shows that children’s different play themes are, to a large degree, gender stereotyped. However, the outdoor environment gives potential for more equal play, as a natural environment and nature materials are seldom pervaded with views of girlish or boyish qualities for the children. Sandbergs and Vuorinen’s (2006) study with girls aged three to 12 showed that play is also more dependent on weather. The majority of the children in this study preferred outdoor play when it was warm outside or when there was snow. Preschool girls showed a preference for indoor play, but older girls prefer to play in the forest.

Preschool teachers also showed differences between female and male preschool teachers’ willingness to play: if they want to participate in children’s play or choose not to participate. It also refers to gender-oriented play (play for boys versus play for girls) and also physical play versus calm play. In this study, male preschool teachers were more prepared to engage in physical play. This emerged from experiences from their own childhood. Female preschool teachers tended to prioritise calm play, which they also experienced in their own childhood. Both female and male preschool teachers in the study emphasised the importance of creating inspiring environments for play (Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005).

**Value: Learning for sustainable development**

The last perspective related to play and learning in Swedish preschools is learning for sustainable development (learning for sustainability, as it is called in Australia). In Swedish preschools, environmental education has been an important part of the preschool program since the document *Pedagogical Programme for the Preschool* was adopted in 1987. The intentions were, and remain, to foster the children’s environmental awareness and promote an environmentally friendly approach (Ministry of Education and Science, 2010). Studies in learning for sustainability are rather few in the international research field of early childhood education (Pramling-Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008; Davis, 2009). The same tendency is shown in the Swedish Early Childhood Educational research field (Hägglund & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2009).

Nevertheless, in one Swedish evaluation study, Årlemalm-Hagsér (2003) interviewed Swedish preschool teachers about issues relating to the environment and the nature directive in the national curriculum. The results showed that the teachers understand the preschool directives in three different ways. The first was the concrete perspective, where the teacher focused on children’s observable behaviours towards nature. The second was the wider perspective, where the teacher recognised herself/himself as a role model, as well as teaching children about environmental issues. Third, in the holistic perspective, preschool teachers explained that they used children’s questions as a basis for their activities, from global to local issues. The majority of the preschool teachers expressed the wider perspective.

Another study related to education for sustainable development explored day care attendants’ comprehension of the concept of sustainable development. In this study, Årlemalm-Hagsér and Sandberg (in press) showed that the day care attendants are now more comfortable with the directives in the Swedish National Curriculum than in the past, and try to work and plan activities in accordance with the preschool curriculum and from a child-centred perspective. The participants defined the concepts of sustainable development as conscious thinking and attitudes, and were viewed from three perspectives: as a holistic concept, just as an environmental concern, or as an issue of democracy. These different approaches created different attitudes and day-to-day practices in the preschools’ pedagogical program. Almost all participants said preschools are characterised by an environment where questions about values, morals, human rights, democracy, participation and a relationship with nature are only lightly touched upon. However, these day care attendants pointed out that they were working to improve learning for sustainable development within their settings.

In a recent article, Johansson (2009) raises questions about the idea of world citizens as an important content in the Swedish National Preschool Curriculum and the moral dimensions in learning for sustainable development. She highlights the need for more research on ‘how moral and democratic values are treated in the Swedish preschools interconnected with the ideas of globalization’ (p. 91).

**Discussion**

Play has traditionally been tied to the school as a way of developing subjects such as maths, reading and writing. Learning has been mainly associated with adult-guided activities. Today, Swedish early childhood education is more influenced by a sociocultural perspective with a child-centred orientation that considers children as competent and active. The most noticeable quality of the Swedish curriculum is that the child is described as an active child and that children’s experience, knowledge, skills and competence are important as starting points of everyday activities in the early childhood settings.

In Sweden, early childhood education is unique in its combination of learning and play, education, care, and
fostering such fundamental values as gender equality and equity. Children’s play can be seen as uncomplicated and simple, but play affects children’s development and learning (see for example, Vygotsky, 1978). It is important to use all opportunities for learning that exist in play. Flow is relevant to the link between play and learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Sandberg, 2003).

Today, play has started to receive more attention in the context of learning, emphasising and focusing learning in play. This effect of play is emphasised in the Swedish National Curriculum (Ministry of Education & Science, 2010). As a result, the evaluation by the National Agency for Education (2008) showed that the National Swedish Curriculum for Preschool potentially has a strong impact on preschool professionals in giving support for everyday play and learning activities in early childhood settings. The conclusion is that the National Curriculum has impact on the education of young children in Sweden because it shapes professionals’ learning experiences, which changes how they go about preschool activity. For professionals, the national curriculum is also a tool for communication with parents. Therefore, we argue that spreading knowledge on how the national curriculum can contribute to opening up new perspectives and changes in pedagogical activities is of educational importance, in both Sweden and internationally.

To sum up, Swedish research about fundamental values in preschool contexts has improved in the past decade. These empirical studies are influenced by the Swedish historical, cultural and pedagogical context, and cannot easily be generalised to a global context. However, results from the studies cited in this article have implications for praxis and theory both in Sweden and other countries, as they increase knowledge and understanding of play and learning, children’s rights, gender equity, and education for sustainability. These are matters of great importance, and more research needs to be undertaken, since children need to begin to develop skills and competencies in preschool for handling issues such as equal rights, sustainability and democracy.

However, we never know what kind of knowledge children need to develop in changing, uncertain times such as these. And we always need to carefully consider the multitude of early childhood education contexts across the world and not think that a universal solution can be the answer. However, we know that democracy and gender equality are not to be taken for granted anywhere and are lifelong processes. We also know that environmental issues must be treated with great seriousness for the fulfilment of human needs and the survival of the Earth. The foundation needs to be laid in early childhood, and the importance of children as stakeholders (Barratt-Hacking, Hacking & Scott, 2007), active participants and responsible partners needs to be recognised, in both local and global issues in the present day and in the future.

References


Play-based learning and the early childhood curriculum

Play-based learning in the early childhood curriculum has historically been associated with the notion of child-centred pedagogy. While the idea of child-centredness might seem self-explanatory, a comprehensive investigation into how the term is used in the field by Chung and Walsh (2000) discovered that up to 40 different interpretations of the concept were found in texts associated with early learning. These interpretations included reference to learning based on children’s interests; children’s participation in the decisions related to their learning; and an emphasis on the individual development of children in relation to particular developmental stages (Chung & Walsh, 2000, p. 216). Chung and Walsh articulated these interpretations to the philosophical works of Froebel and Dewey and to the discourse of developmentalism. Historically, these theoretical and philosophical informants have suggested an emphasis on play-based learning that has seen curriculum informed by the idea that the child and the child’s experiences should be central to all learning (p. 229).

In recent years, the suggestion that the early childhood curriculum should be informed primarily by child-centred notions of play has been under increased discussion from a range of theoretical perspectives, including the cultural-historical, feminist, post-structuralist and post-modern movements (Wood, 2010; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Collectively, these discussions are increasingly referenced by the term ‘post-developmental’ (Blaise, 2009), and have raised questions regarding the social, cultural, gendered and economic assumptions associated with the role of child-centred play in early childhood curriculum (Langford, 2010). An important aspect of the post-development conversation has been consideration of the extent to which children are supported in the acquisition of content knowledge through child-centred play (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Tzuo, 2007), particularly where play-based learning involves a predominance of open-ended and freely chosen play activities:

The established child-centred ideology reinforced the focus on activities rather than outcomes, and less attention was paid to specifying desirable knowledge, skills, understanding, dispositions, and outcomes, within a clearly articulated curriculum framework. The notion that curriculum content arises through needs and interests was one of the key weaknesses of the developmental approach (Darling, 1994; cited in text). For example, showing an interest in a range of topics or activities is not the same as making meaningful connections in which learners acquire, test, refine and reflect on their knowledge and skills (Wood, 2007, p. 123).
The research emerging from a reconsideration of child-centred play in the early childhood curriculum is contributing to a depth of knowledge regarding the importance of teacher interactions during children's play (Fleer, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons & Melhuish, 2008; Ryan & Goffin, 2008); the relationship between children's cultural experiences and their funds of knowledge as a precursor to play-based learning (Brooker, 2005; Hedges, 2008); and the role of teacher planning for learning in play-based activities (Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie & Hunt, 2010; Gibbons, 2007). Collectively, increased research and theorisation in the field is beginning to suggest that 1) play-based learning needs to draw on and recognise children's existing cultural competencies; 2) acknowledge and actively include the role of the adult educator in connecting children's play activities to particular conceptual and content-based ideas; and 3) promote the importance of teacher planning for learning in relation to children's play and the acquisition of content knowledge. Contemporary research regarding the role of play in the early childhood curriculum therefore represents a shift from the primary developmental child-centred orientation to a focus on the nature of the dynamic relationship between children (learners), teachers and content (Ball & Forzani, 2007; Grieshaber, 2008) within a play-based framework that moves beyond child-centred versus teacher-directed dichotomies (Broadhead, Wood & Howard, 2010).

**Early childhood environmental education**

The importance of the early years has been acknowledged and recognised in environmental education for some time (Carson, 1965). While emerging discussion in the area has suggested that Australian early childhood environmental education may be viewed as ‘marginal’ (Davis & Elliott, 2003), an historical, philosophical connection to nature-based learning in the early years can be derived from the early philosophical works of Frobel. Interestingly, it is these works that are also connected to notions of the naturally unfolding capacities of the child which support arguments regarding the role of child-centeredness and open-ended play in early childhood education. In recent years, increased development around school-based environmental education, policies and curricula has generated increased interest in the role of environmental education in early childhood education. Despite this increased interest, there has been very little research concerning early childhood education and environmental education. For example, Davis (2009) reported that during the period 1996–2007 less than 5% of published papers in Australian and international early childhood research journals involved studies concerned with environmental education and early childhood education. Davis (2005; 2009) and Elliott and Davis (2007; 2009) have also argued that there are very few early childhood centres and/or kindergartens in Australia (and internationally) that are demonstrating exemplary environmental education practice. Despite such claims, it is also reasonable to argue from what discussion is available that the practice of environmental education in early childhood currently requires more investigation.

For many years, teachers, parents, researchers and policy-makers have asked pertinent questions about the influence of early childhood environmental education experiences on children's dispositions, knowledge and behaviours later in life (Chawla & Cushing, 2007; Palmer, 1993; Palmer, Suggate, Robottom & Hart, 1999). Palmer and colleagues (1993; 1999) and Chawla and Cushing (2007) have both independently researched this question with adult environmental educators, and have shown a convincing relationship between childhood experiences in nature and the formation of pro-environment beliefs and lifestyles later in life. However, these studies are difficult to relate to children's contemporary experiences, given the pace of the last two decades where children are living in textual, visual, virtual and highly digitised worlds (Zevenbergen, 2007). As such, there is urgent need for research about the practice of early childhood environmental education and the way in which this is conducted in educational contexts with an emphasis on child-centeredness and the use of play-based learning over the acquisition of content knowledge (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2006).

**Play-based learning, early childhood environmental education and the Australian Early Years Learning Framework**

Postdevelopmental research into play-based learning and the role of environmental education in early childhood curriculum have largely evolved independently of each other during the last 10 to 15 years. However, it is interesting to note that these two important aspects of contemporary early childhood curriculum were both recently represented as key elements of Australia's newly released national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). The EYLF outlines the principles, practices and outcomes considered necessary for supporting young children's (birth to five years) development and learning in early childhood prior-to-school settings across Australia and is a key component of the Australian Government's National Quality Framework (DEEWR, 2010). In this document 'play' is presented as a pedagogical practice that connects with children's learning, while environmental education is related to children's learning spaces, and is also listed as a subcategory of Learning Outcome Two (Children
are connected with and contribute to their world).

The definition of play provided in the EYLF includes historical and contemporary arguments about the role of play in children’s learning. Initially drawing on a more traditional child-centred view, play is defined as providing ‘opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). This definition is followed by an expanded description which acknowledges some of the more contemporary research suggesting the need for active involvement on part of the educator to support children’s learning:

*Early childhood educators take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning. They engage in sustained shared conversations with children to extend their thinking (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; cited in text). They provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5).*

Interestingly, this definition of play is followed by an explanation of the concept ‘intentional teaching’ which is defined as teaching that is ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). The notion of intentional teaching challenges the child-centred perspective on play in which children are encouraged to create their own learning and understandings through open-ended and largely self-directed play by focusing also on the role of the teacher in play-based learning. Several pedagogical strategies related to intentional teaching are suggested, including modelling and demonstrating, open questioning, speculating, explaining and engaging in shared thinking and problem solving. The importance of planning for intentional teaching and knowledge building to foster learning is also acknowledged.

Environmental education is referenced in two places in the document. First in relation to ‘Learning Environments’ as an aspect of practice, and secondly as a subcategory of Learning Outcome Two: ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’. As an aspect of practice, the outdoors is emphasised as a uniquely Australian learning environment for young children that provides a platform for ongoing environmental education:

*Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments. They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors. Play spaces natural environments include plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16).*

Learning Outcome Two ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’ contains reference to a specific subcategory regarding environmental education; namely ‘children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment’. Several indicators for this outcome are listed, suggesting children evidence such responsibility and respect when they:

- use play to investigate, project and explore new ideas
- participate with others to solve problems and contribute to group outcomes
- demonstrate an increasing knowledge of, and respect for, nature and constructed environments
- explore, infer, predict and hypothesise in order to develop an increased understanding of the interdependence between land, people, plants and animals
- show growing appreciation and care for natural and constructed environments
- explore relationships with other living and non-living things and observe, notice and respond to change
- develop an awareness of the impact of human activity on environments and the interdependence of living things (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29).

The positioning of environmental education in the EYLF reflects policy developments in the field of early childhood environmental education in which environmental education is positioned as important in children’s broad early learning experiences (Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and Arts, 2009; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2008). It is interesting that the emphasis in these goals is clearly environmental education rather than sustainability, education for sustainability (EFS) or education for sustainable development (EFSD). This reflects contemporary, yet critical thinking in environmental education research and policy development (Jickling, 2006; Jickling & Spork, 1998) which is yet to more fully inform research and policy in early childhood environmental education (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2005). For example, a recent policy document by UNESCO (2008) is indicative of this stance, suggesting that ‘early childhood education for sustainability is much more than environmental education. It should be broader than simply taking children outdoors to discover the beauty of nature and speaking about the natural environment’ (p. 12). Defining environmental education as merely a study of nature suggests early childhood education may need to engage more fully with the literature derived from environmental education research, policy and development.

While the EYLF references contemporary research into play-based learning and includes elements of environmental education as learning outcomes for
children, the connections between these two emerging areas of research and practice in early childhood education require further consideration (Davis, 2009). What does play-based learning interface with conceptions of teacher intentionality actually look like? And, in what ways can play-based learning be used to achieve the learning outcomes associated with environmental education from the EYLF? Answers to these questions are beginning to emerge from a research project aimed at investigating how different play-types impact teacher planning for learning, and how teacher interactions with children during these play-types support learning in the area of environmental education.

**Project overview: Examining play-based approaches to learning through environmental education**

The project examines the extent to which different types of play influence teacher planning for learning as well as their pedagogical interactions with children during play as a support. Three types of play are under consideration, including open-ended play, modelled play and purposefully framed play (Edwards, et al., 2010). Open-ended play involves teachers providing children with materials related to particular concepts derived from environmental education and allowing children to use the materials to create their own understandings of the concepts. Modelled play involves teachers ‘showing’ children how to use the materials to illustrate environmental education concepts prior to allowing the children to use the materials themselves. Purposefully framed play involves teachers providing children with opportunities to use the materials as well as participating in modelled-play experiences.

Sixteen early learning centres across Melbourne, including inner city locations, outer suburban and metropolitan settings have been involved in the project. All settings have included children and teachers from preschools with children aged four to five years (n = 114), and the teachers (n = 16; three male and 13 female) all being qualified at the Bachelor degree or higher level. All teachers designed and implemented the three play-types for groups of up to six children per centre. Teachers self-selected into the play clusters and each cluster then implemented the play-types in a different order. For example, the three teachers working in Cluster one implemented open-ended play, then modelled play and then purposefully framed play. Teachers from Cluster two implemented open-ended play, purposefully framed play and modelled play. In total there were six clusters each implementing a different iteration of the play-types. Teachers maintained their normal planning and curriculum documentation, in addition to completing reflective journals. Each implementation of the three play-types was video-recorded and the recordings later shown to the children as the basis of a video-stimulated recall group interview. These group interviews were also video-recorded and focused on discussing with the children what they were doing, and what they believed they were learning during their participation in each play-type. The group interview footage was later shown to the teachers who discussed the children’s responses to their participation in each play-type in relation to their planning for the learning, and their interactions with the children during each play-type. The teacher interviews were also video-recorded.

When planning the play-types, teachers were encouraged to embed concepts of biodiversity into the play experiences. Biodiversity was selected as the conceptual focus area of environmental education as previous research has suggested that it is an area which connects strongly with the lives of young children and teachers and is suitable for integrating into the early childhood curriculum (Carson, 1965; Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2006; Pearson & Degotardi, 2009). Within the area of biodiversity, teachers were provided with a concept map suggesting ways to think about the concept and how it could be considered within an early childhood context (Figure 1). From this map, each teacher selected the main concept that would inform the three play experiences he or she would implement according to the order of play-type their cluster was assigned. This meant some teachers focused on macro invertebrate (backyard) or Australian animal habitats, whilst others focused on plants, growing food, composting and worm farms. The project was conducted with ethical approval from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. A core aspect of the ethical procedures involved obtaining consent from children and parents/families. Child consent was sought using a child-friendly explanatory statement and consent form (for example, circling a smiling face to indicate consent) prior to participation. On actual days of data collection all children with prior and family consent were invited verbally to participate in the associated activities. Children declining to participate or showing signs of not wanting to be involved (for example asking to leave the activity once they had commenced) were permitted to do so.

Due to the large scale of the project, data analysis for the wider project is still progressing. However early analysis suggests that the implementation of the three play-types allowed the teachers to think more carefully about what they wanted the children to learn and how they would approach this learning as the three play-types were implemented. This paper focuses on the experiences of one teacher from Cluster three who implemented modelled play, then open-ended play and finally purposefully framed play. While the analysis of data within the larger project is focused on linking the
children’s responses to the levels of teacher planning and the range of pedagogical strategies employed in each play-type, this paper focuses on a qualitative thematic analysis of the teacher’s response to the combined play-types in relation her thinking about the relationship between teacher planning, intentional teaching and the children’s learning about biodiversity. Initially the data was coded according each play-type with connections across play-types then identified as a way of examining the relationship between teacher planning, intentional teaching and the children’s learning. In the larger project, the linking between the children’s responses to the teacher planning and the range of pedagogical strategies employed in each play-type is situated in relation to the children’s responses to their own play, using video-stimulated recall. Here the children’s descriptions of their play and learning are linked to the teacher’s planning documents and video footage of the teachers engaged in each play-type with the children. The video analysis software Snapper is being used to code teacher pedagogical strategies and children’s descriptions of play and learning. These codes are then being entered into SPSS and used as a basis for linking the children’s responses to the different levels of teacher planning and pedagogical interaction for each play-type.

Karin’s play experiences: Worm farms and the vegetable garden

Karin was one of three teachers involved in Cluster three. Karin’s centre was located in a suburban area of Melbourne and served children from a predominately Western-European middle class socioeconomic community. Karin’s play experiences were designed to build on the children’s existing interest in the kindergarten vegetable garden and focused on building worm farms with a small group of children who participated in the project. The focus on worm farms was also connected to the vegetable garden and the project was extended to the rest of the kindergarten group.

Modelled play

For her modelled-play experience Karin prepared a table of materials for making worm farms in large jars. She had small buckets containing sand, soil and leaves. There was also a book about worms open at a page focused on making a worm farm. There were five large glass jars, one for herself and one each for the four participating children. Karin invited the children to the table and said that today she wanted to show them how to make a worm farm. She started layering the materials in her jar, dirt first, then sand, dirt and sand. Finally she placed leaves on the top. She talked to the children about what she was doing and stopped to check her jar against the example in the book. Three of the four children watched her demonstration. The fourth child declined to participate and wanted to paint instead. In line with the ethical principles of consent the child’s painting request was honoured. Following her demonstration the three children began to create their own farms. They began with the dirt and layered the sand and dirt as demonstrated. One child checked her jar against the book as she had seen Karin do. The fourth child left her painting and came over to make a worm farm. The children explained to her what she needed to do. Karin returned and opened a box of worms which she then shared among the children.

Open-ended play

Karin laid out the same materials that were used for making a worm farm as in the modelled-play experience. The four children from the modelled-play activity were invited to participate in making a worm
farm again. Karin said to the children ‘I am going to do some work now and leave you to make your own worm farms.’ She left the table and went to another part of the room. Karin’s model worm farm from the first experience was leaning against the book. One of the children looked at Karin’s model carefully before building her farm with an initial layer of dirt. Another child said ‘Karin it says dirt first but I want to use sand.’ She began with a layer of sand, then dirt and added a handful of leaves before adding more sand. ‘Karin, I am done’, she called, ‘I have made some mud for them.’ Karin returned to the table and helped the children to add their worms to the farms.

Purposefully framed play

Karin gathered the four participating children around her on an outside mat. She began by showing the children a worm puppet which had a material saddle around its body. ‘There is something interesting about this worm. It has a saddle’, she said. This led to a discussion about the characteristics of worms. Do they have eyes? Do they like to live in dark or light places? Do they have legs or arms? Karin and the children talked about how the worms like to burrow down into the dirt and how the worms can die if their skin dries out. Next Karin showed the children a non-fiction book about worm habitats and they talked about how the worms live in the soil and are protected by the leaf litter. Karin showed an illustration of a worm working its way towards the leaf litter and talked about how the worm takes tiny pieces of leaf back into the soil. After looking at the book, Karin introduced the children to a poem about worms (Slimy worms by Susie Davies) and then began discussing what they had done on the previous occasions when they had made the worm farms. Karin invited the children into the yard to collect the materials necessary for building a worm farm. The children collected dirt, sand and leaves without further direction and went to a table with more jars for making farms. Karin showed the children the farms they had made earlier and pointed out the tracks left by the worms as they worked their way to the top of the jars towards the leaves. She talked about how the worms used the leaves to make a special ‘worm juice’ called castings and suggested they put the castings on their vegetable garden to help make the soil warm and moist for the vegetables to grow in. The children began making a worm farm each and Karin continued to read from the book: ‘worms are busy creatures and they play an important role in the garden keeping the soil in good condition’. Karin helped the children add worms to the jars. Two of the children were reluctant to touch the worms saying they were ‘ticklish and scary’, while two others held them in their hands before placing them in their jars.

Karin’s thoughts—linking the play-types and the learning

During the teacher interview Karin shared her thoughts about the relationship between the play-types, her planning for the children’s learning and the learning she believed had occurred. One of the most interesting findings to emerge from Karin’s interview was the way in which participation in the project had challenged her thinking about the relationship between planning for intentional teaching and the children’s acquisition of content knowledge through the different play-types (Edwards et al. 2010). It was also interesting to note the way in which the work of the children participating in the research was integrated with the work of the larger group. These two findings evolved during the interview as Karin discussed the difference between working with the children on the worm farms through the three play-types compared to a previous implementation when the entire group built one large farm:

It was really nice to re-visit the activities, doing the three sessions, which I probably wouldn’t do, you know, if we made a worm farm once, we wouldn’t have gone back and done that specific activity again unless other children hadn’t experienced it. So I think there was a bit of enriching there doing it three times.

Karin was asked if she was to do the activity in the future would she continue to implement the activity once with the larger group, or would she a take a different approach derived from her use of the three play-types:

The three-play types, I found that a good way of teaching. You know to actually have it the three ways and to see what they were learning. That made me really think and reflect quite a bit. The three play-types, it was a bit like scaffolding, like each time, even though in the modelled they seemed to have gained the most. But I still think each time they were learning more about the worms and getting a depth of learning.

Here Karin was interested in the way in which the three play-types had worked in combination to support the children’s learning about the ideas associated with environmental education. So rather than focusing on one implementation of the experience, or thinking about using only one play-type (such as open-ended play) Karin reflected on the way in which using the three play-types together seemed to support deeper learning for the four children participating in the research. This finding aligns with research suggesting that open-ended play alone is insufficient for supporting children’s learning (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Langford, 2010). Karin then talked about how the learning of the four focus children extended throughout the group.
We had lots of discussion after the activities (after the filming) and what I thought has been lovely has been this group of children (research group) has been teaching the other children. So there has been lots of interest and questions and lots of perusal of books about it. We made a big worm farm all together (the whole group) after the three play sessions. The four children, they participated in this, and they talked about it and showed the others. They were quite keen to go and get their jars and show the children the tracks. There was a lot of inquiry.

Karin suggested that the depth of knowledge obtained by the four children was illustrated by their capacity to engage with and lead the other children. A consequence of this was that the children were then able to participate in peer learning, a form of learning highly valued by Karin:

To be able to talk to the other children about the different things, like the saddle and the babies and what worms like. I thought that it was very interesting to hear what they had retained each time. Even to talk about the soil and the compost and putting that all together. In one of our discussions we were looking at the leaves in the book and talking about the worm taking the leaf down and one of them said ‘it needs to make air through the track’ so there was a lot thought. I liked it when the children were teaching the other children because it is good learning for them. They learn a lot from their peers. There was one child (not in the research group) and he said he found a worm at home and it didn’t have a saddle. So he was using the words, he had the knowledge of what a saddle is.

When asked how the implementation of three play-types compared to her previous approach of implementing the experience as a ‘one-off’ activity, Karin suggested that having modelled play and open-ended play prior to purposefully framed play had made her think more carefully about her pedagogical strategies and how she was going to help the children learn the content associated with the worm farm:

I think having the three play-types and going into the purposefully framed (after the modelled and open) had me really thinking about what I was going to do, what I was going to discuss with them and how I was going to build on that knowledge. The play-types really did make me think about it a lot more.

The increased level of thinking about how she would teach what she wanted the children to learn through the play-types was considered by Karin to have supported the learning of the four research children which was extended to the broader group. Karin suggested that having made the farms three times in the jars with the smaller group meant that there were models for the other children to learn from:

It gave that little group a chance to teach the others. In the larger group the discussions were led a lot more by the small group. I think having this smaller group made it move in a different direction. When we went outside, they were actually showing the others the tracks in their jars. And that probably made a difference to the understanding of the others. Because if you think we’re going to say ‘we are going to make a worm farm’ and you just make it, well, you might talk to them about tracks and what the worms are going to do, but they can’t see it. They don’t know what tracks are. But if you have the other children and they can go and get their jars and say ‘look at the tracks’ well that’s a big connection.

Here Karin was discussing a shifting pedagogical approach in which her thinking about the relationship between intentional teaching, play and the learning were linked to use of the three play-types in combination. This was a particularly interesting suggestion, as the initial aim of the project had been to determine which of three play-types was more likely to prompt teachers to plan for learning, and therefore allow the children to talk more readily about what they had learned. However, Karin described how the combined play-types prompted her to plan for intentional teaching in a way which supported the learning of the core research group which was then integrated into the learning of the larger group. This suggests a tentative response to the questions raised earlier about how play-based learning might be integrated with intentional teaching to allow children to achieve the learning outcomes associated with environmental education from the ELYF. Karin’s experience suggests that the three play-types build on each other to form a structure in which the children can continue to build a depth of knowledge, rather than having a one-off learning experience through a particular activity or through participation in only one play-type. This finding builds on existing research which emphasises the importance of teacher interactions during play (see for example, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008 and Thorpe et al., 2004). Karin referred to this as ‘a bit like scaffolding each time’ which indicates an alternative way of thinking about intentional teaching, such that it could be considered in terms of how the three play-types will ‘lead into’ each other as a basis for scaffolding deeper learning over time. In part, this more scaffolded or structured approach to play and intentional teaching reflects the fact that learning about the environment involves learning particular content and concepts which children may not necessarily access through child-centred play (Wood, 2007). Karin touched on this when she compared the difference between the play-types, and what each might offer in terms of children’s learning:

I think with a science concept it needs to be modelled. It needs to have teacher interaction and direction. I think with a specific activity it needs...
to have some teacher interaction. Open-ended is important for imaginative play and socio-dramatic play. I don’t think a child will just go and make a worm form for open-ended play. Something like this needs to be modelled and discussed.

Karin’s experience of the three play-types and the worm farms suggests one way of thinking about how intentional teaching can be integrated with play-based learning to support children’s learning in the area of environmental education. This moves towards an integrated approach in which pedagogical strategies associated with each play-type can be combined to create an overall learning experience. For example, open-ended play can be used to explore the properties of materials that might be used in modelled play to illustrate particular content knowledge, while the illustrations from modelled play can form the basis of child–teacher interactions and discussions during purposefully framed play. In this way, no one play-type is positioned as having greater pedagogical value than another—rather they each offer pedagogical strengths which can be harnessed to help children begin to explore and understand content knowledge associated with different aspects of environmental education.

Implications and conclusion

Karin’s interpretation of the three play-types as pedagogically linked suggests that children can learn content knowledge associated with environmental education within the context of the early childhood curriculum. Thinking about the three play-types in combination rather than focusing on what each has to offer teaching and learning as a single pedagogical platform provides a way of responding to the literature which increasingly emphasises the role of teacher interactions during play (Fleer, 2010; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008) and teacher planning for learning before play (Edwards et al., 2010; Gibbons, 2007). These ideas, which are reflected in the EYLF through the concepts of play and intentional teaching (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) are perhaps best realised when they are implemented in relation to particular content areas. Historical and emerging research suggests that environmental education is highly important in early childhood education (Carson, 1965; Davis, 2009; Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2006; UNESCO, 2008) and the inclusion of environmental education in the EYLF reflects this stance (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29). Early findings from this project suggests that intentional teaching and play-based learning may be framed according to the integration of the three play-types which support the acquisition of content knowledge associated with environmental education. Importantly, this suggestion aligns with research findings arguing the benefits of a bi-directional relationship between play and the curriculum, whereby educators work to develop ‘mixed or integrated pedagogies that are planned intentionally to help children learn specific skills and concepts, whilst play-generated curriculum activities can emerge for children’s spontaneous interests and activities’ (Wood, 2007, p. 130). Movement towards this form of play-based curriculum suggests potential for reducing dichotomous arguments about child-centredness versus teacher-centredness and allows for the dynamic relationship between children, teachers and content to be more effectively realised through play (Ball & Forzani, 2007; Grieshaber, 2008). Such pedagogies of play further lend themselves to an environmentalising of early childhood education curriculum.

References


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New Zealand developed Te Whāriki in the mid-nineties and it has since received significant praise from all around the world for its innovative approach. Blaiklock, in the online Annex to this edition, delves more deeply into Te Whāriki, and draws comparisons with the Early Years Foundation Stage, the UK early childhood curriculum. Australia has recently released the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), its first national early childhood curriculum document and both academics and practitioners are now engaging with the document and exploring how it is put into practice, and speculating as to how effective it might yet prove to be.

In this context, we offer you a hard copy edition of AJEC focused around early childhood curriculum and the issues engaging attention at present. We also offer you an online Annex, not part of the curriculum theme, but just as significant in articulating issues of current concern.

Susan Edwards and Jennifer Sumsion have provided an eloquent introduction to the curriculum-themed hard copy, and draws comparisons with the Early Years Foundation Stage, the UK early childhood curriculum. Australia has recently released the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), its first national early childhood curriculum document and both academics and practitioners are now engaging with the document and exploring how it is put into practice, and speculating as to how effective it might yet prove to be.

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Susan Edwards and Jennifer Sumsion have provided an eloquent introduction to the curriculum-themed hard copy, and it is not my role here to repeat their words. They have collected together eight articles that address key issues in early childhood curriculum in various ways, reflecting the importance of rigorous debate and the need to value different perspectives. Sandberg and Årlendalm-Hagsér discuss the Swedish early childhood curriculum and the key role played in that of issues relating to gender equity, children's rights and education for sustainability. Using a post-modern lens Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence examine the Canadian curriculum and argue that we need to think of curricula as living things and not expect them to remain static and unchanging. Engaging in debate around curricula ensures they continue to adapt and evolve.

Play is identified as a key component of the EYLF, and a key factor in children's learning. Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie examine how play can be used to support children's learning in environmental education. Fleer looks more closely at how the social and technical world around children influences their play and what this might mean for early childhood curriculum. Mawson follows the thread in relation to technology and play, examining the technological understandings children bring into their play, and how they use these understandings in collaboration with others. Play School, an Australian children's television program, represents the popular media's focus on learning through play. In tracking the program, Harrison is able to explicate some of our changing professional understandings of play. Hedges also addresses popular cultural understandings and how we can use these to create rich learning opportunities for children.

Looking at a different (but related) curriculum, Gibbons examine the curriculum in teacher education. Whilst many of us argue for some form of social constructivism in our work with children, in some contexts a transmission model of teaching and learning for adults is more commonly applied.

In addition to the paper by Blaiklock already mentioned above, the online Annex contains four other papers. McTurk, Robinson, Lea, Nutton and Carapetis discuss the idea of school readiness, and in particular, how that applies to Indigenous children. Hill, Glover and Colbung also work with Aboriginal children. They examine the stories Aboriginal children like to read, or have read to them, and who does that reading.

Two papers address childcare issues specifically. Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood, and Brownlee asked their pre-service early childhood students about working in child care and found that, for these students, it is still positioned as undesirable in the current context. Those who were thinking about working in child care tended to be motivated by altruism, and there remained many barriers in their minds in relation to childcare work. Market philosophy holds that demand will drive quality improvements in child care (and presumably address some of the barriers that prevent students from wanting to work in the profession). Demand itself originates with parents, who, according to market philosophy, will be motivated to select high-quality care for their children, thus ensuring that services not delivering high quality will not survive. Fenech, Harrison and Sumsion found in their survey of parents, that there was a limited understanding of the complexities of quality in early child care, which questions the assumption that parent demand will drive quality improvements.

Our first edition of 2011 gives you an exciting read and I challenge you to reflect on the issues raised in these papers, so that together we continue to enhance the professionalism of the early childhood field.

Margaret Sims
Curriculum guidelines for early literacy: A comparison of New Zealand and England

Ken Blaiklock
Unitec Institute of Technology

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY literacy knowledge is generally seen as an important aspect of early childhood education. The way early literacy learning is promoted, however, varies greatly in different national curriculum frameworks. This article compares the approach taken in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Te Whāriki) with the approach outlined in the curriculum for young children in England (The Early Years Foundation Stage or EYFS). The curricula are compared in relation to (1) the description of literacy-related learning outcomes; (2) guidance for teachers on how to foster literacy learning; and (3) guidance on formative and summative assessment.

The EYFS contains more detailed information in each area of comparison. The article suggests that the lack of information on literacy in Te Whāriki may mean that children are provided with an inadequate range of literacy experiences in New Zealand early childhood centres.

Introduction

Early childhood professionals in New Zealand are accustomed to hearing praise for Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). Praise for the innovative approach of Te Whāriki has come from teachers and academics, nationally and internationally (for example, Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Fleer, 2003; Smith, 2003; Tyler, 2002).

Te Whāriki contains many admirable statements about early childhood education. There are few who would disagree with the introductory statement in Te Whāriki that declares the curriculum was founded on the following aspirations for children: ‘to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

It appears, however, that the rhetoric that surrounds Te Whāriki may not match the reality. No research has been carried out to show whether the implementation of Te Whāriki has made a positive difference to the learning and wellbeing of children across a range of early childhood services. Furthermore, concern has been expressed that the lack of curriculum content in Te Whāriki (in areas such as language, literacy, music, mathematics, art and science) provides teachers with little guidance on how to provide children with a range of experiences in crucial areas of learning (see Hedges & Cullen, 2005).

In this article, I focus on one essential area of learning, namely early literacy. I analyse the information that Te Whāriki provides on this topic and compare it to the approach outlined in the curriculum used in England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008b).

The EYFS is very different in structure and content to Te Whāriki and therefore makes for an interesting comparison. My analysis of the two curricula will be divided into the following three areas:

1. Early literacy goals and learning outcomes
2. Guidance for teachers on how to foster literacy learning
3. Assessment.

Early literacy goals and learning outcomes

Te Whāriki is divided into five broad strands: Wellbeing, Belonging, Contribution, Communication, and Exploration. Each strand is subdivided into three or four goals and each goal includes a number of indicative
learning outcomes. Literacy outcomes are included within the third goal of the Communication strand, which states: ‘Children experience an environment where they experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 78).

Under this goal the following literacy learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 78) are listed:

Children develop:

- An understanding that symbols can be ‘read’ by others and that thoughts, experiences, and ideas can be represented through words, pictures, print, numbers, sounds, shapes, models, and photographs.
- Familiarity with print and its uses by exploring and observing the use of print in activities that have meaning and purpose for children.
- Familiarity with an appropriate selection of the stories and literature valued by the cultures in their community.
- An expectation that words and books can amuse, delight, comfort, illuminate, inform, and excite.
- Experience with some of the technology and resources for mathematics, reading, and writing.
- Experience with creating stories and symbols.

The general nature of the above learning outcomes can be partly explained by recognising that the outcomes are designed to be applicable to all children throughout the birth–five years age range. Hence the outcomes do not convey an expectation that older children may be capable of more complex learning than younger children.

In contrast, the EYFS is more explicit about age-related developmental changes (see Practice guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). The framework of the EYFS divides learning and development into six areas:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Communication, Language and Literacy
- Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Physical Development
- Creative Development.

Each of these areas is further divided into subsections. For example, Communication, Language, and Literacy is subdivided into the following: Language for Communication, Language for Thinking, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, and Handwriting.

Within each subsection, descriptive information is provided about what children may typically learn within the following overlapping age ranges: birth–11 months, 8–20 months, 16–26 months, 22–36 months, 30–50 months, and 40–60+ months.

Although information is provided about age-related changes, the EYFS guidelines recognise that there is considerable variation between children. Cautions are provided that the descriptions of learning should not be seen as age-related goals. It is also noted that ‘children will not necessarily progress sequentially through the stages’ and ‘some elements may appear to have been achieved very quickly, others will take much longer (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a, p. 11).

Specific goals are stated for the time that children complete the Early Years Foundation Stage. These final goals (known as the ‘early learning goals’) are designed to be at a level that children can achieve ‘by the end of the year in which they turn five’. (Unlike New Zealand, where nearly all children start school on their fifth birthday, children in England start school in the term in which they turn five. Hence some children will begin primary school a few months before they turn five, whereas other children may be nearer five and a half years.)

The Early learning goals for literacy occur within five subsections of the Communication, Language, and Literacy division of the EYFS (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2008b, p. 13). (Additional goals that focus purely on listening and speaking are not included in the following list.)

1. Language for Communication

- Enjoy listening to and using spoken and written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.
- Listen with enjoyment, and respond to stories, songs and other music, rhymes and poems and make up their own stories, songs, rhymes and poems.

2. Linking Sounds and Letters

- Hear and say sounds in words in the order in which they occur.
- Link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet.
- Use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.

3. Reading

- Explore and experiment with sounds, words, and texts.
- Retell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.
- Read a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently.
- Know that print carries meaning and, in English, is read from left to right and top to bottom.
- Show an understanding of the elements of stories such as main character, sequence of events and
openings, and how information can be found in non-fiction texts to answer questions about where, who and how.

4. Writing

- Attempt writing for different purposes, using features of different forms such as lists, stories, and instructions.
- Write their own names and other things such as labels and captions, and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation.

5. Handwriting

- Use a pencil and hold it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.

A comparison of the early literacy outcomes for Te Whāriki and for the EYFS shows that the expectations for New Zealand children are markedly lower than those suggested for children in England. The comparison is made more complicated by the fact that children may be older or younger than five when they complete the EYFS. Nevertheless, it is readily apparent that the English curriculum is aimed at developing a much more comprehensive range of literacy skills than are covered in Te Whāriki.

The early literacy learning outcomes for Te Whāriki are phrased in general terms and focus on children gaining ‘experience’ and developing ‘familiarity’ with print and stories. The EYFS covers these types of outcomes in the goals that are listed under the ‘Language for Communication’ subsection. The other literacy-related subsections in the EYFS (that is, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, and Handwriting) contain numerous literacy goals that are not mentioned in Te Whāriki.

Goals in these subsections focus on children developing skills that are crucial for beginning reading and writing (see National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, for a review of research on early literacy skills). An emphasis is placed on learning about letters and letter sounds in order to begin to be able to read and write simple words. In contrast, Te Whāriki makes no mention of letter knowledge in any learning outcomes.

No rationale for the omission of letter knowledge is provided in Te Whāriki, nor is this discussed in explanatory writings about the development of the curriculum (for example, Carr & May, 1996). Cullen (2007) has suggested that the lack of attention to the component skills of literacy may link with the pervasiveness of the ‘whole-language’ approach in New Zealand primary schools. Furthermore, Cullen points out that the sociocultural perspective underlying Te Whāriki means that early childhood teachers may sometimes include literacy learning within other experiences but would rarely plan to teach specific literacy skills.

The greater attention to letter knowledge seen in the EYFS is reflective of the shift towards including more phonics teaching in the early school years in England. This follows a major review of research into methods of teaching literacy (Rose, 2006). Although the review highlighted the importance of early phonics, it also emphasised that speaking and listening skills are the bedrock of literacy development. Hence it is important to see that the inclusion of letter knowledge in the outcomes of the EYFS does not take away from the emphasis that the curriculum gives to the development of language for communication and thinking.

Guidance for teachers on how to foster literacy learning

Te Whāriki provides little information about the provision of learning experiences related to the literacy outcomes that are mentioned in the document. Statements about learning that are included in Te Whāriki tend to be very general and reflect the sociocultural basis of the curriculum. For example, the introduction states:

This curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things. Children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others, as well as through individual exploration and reflection (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Only minimal guidance is provided on how teachers can foster learning in particular areas. Some examples of learning experiences are included for the goals in each strand but these do not necessarily link with specific outcomes and are phrased in broad terms. For example, suggested literacy experiences include the following: ‘Adults read books to infants’, ‘The toddler’s name is written on belongings’, and ‘Children experience a wide range of stories’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 79).

Information on how to use Te Whāriki for program planning is also very general. Early childhood services are advised to ‘develop their own distinctive pattern for planning, assessment and evaluation’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 28). There is no requirement to ensure that children are provided with experiences related to a core set of learning outcomes. Instead centres are advised to ‘offer sufficient learning experiences for the children to ensure that the curriculum goals are realised’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 28). The breadth of the goals, however, means that it would be possible for a centre to consider that it was covering all the goals of Te Whāriki even if the program contained no reading or writing experiences.

The non-specific nature of the guidelines in Te Whāriki might not be such a concern if teachers were provided...
with supplementary resources on how to foster literacy. Currently, however, the Ministry of Education provides early childhood teachers with little information about ways to provide a range of literacy experiences for young children.

A very different situation exists in England. The structure of the EYFS makes clear links between specific aspects of literacy learning and guidance for effective practice. As noted above, EYFS publications include descriptions of the literacy learning that typically occurs for particular age ranges (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). Teachers can use this information to assist their understanding of individual children. Ideas on specific practice are given for each of the age-related descriptions of literacy learning that occur within the relevant subsections of the Communication, Language and Literacy section of the EYFS (that is, Language for Communication, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, and Handwriting).

Extensive additional resources are available to assist EYFS teachers in the provision of appropriate literacy experiences for children. Video clips of teachers engaged in effective activities can be found on the CD-Rom that accompanies Practice guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage. The Department for Children, Schools, and Families provides publications on emergent writing activities (Mark making matters, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008c) and introducing children to letter names and sounds (Letters and sounds: Principles and practice of high quality phonics. Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008d). Online professional development courses on language and literacy are available to all EYFS teachers. In addition, commercial publishers have developed many resources that link with the EYFS guidelines. (A directory of these resources is located on the standards website of the Department for Children, Schools, and Families: www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/phonics/clld/.)

Both Te Whāriki and the EYFS emphasise the importance of play for all areas of learning. The EYFS is clearer, however, on the role of the teacher in guiding learning. Although Te Whāriki suggests that adults should support and extend children’s play and interests, little information is given on the provision of teacher-led activities. In contrast, the EYFS guidelines state: ‘All the areas must be delivered through planned, purposeful play, with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a, p. 10). Adult-led activities are defined as follows:

*Adult-led activities are those which adults initiate. The activities are not play, and children are likely not to see them as play, but they should be playful—with activities presented to children which are as open-ended as possible, with elements of imagination and active exploration that will increase the interest and motivation for children. … Practitioners plan adult-led activities with awareness of the children in the setting and of their responsibility to support children’s progress in all areas of learning. They will build on what children know and can do, and often draw on interests and use materials or themes, observed in child initiated activities (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a, p. 13)."

The advice in the EYFS to provide a balance of adult- and child-led activities is supported by the findings of a recent European study of over 3000 children (aged from three years) in 141 early childhood settings (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). The study found that ‘in effective settings, the balance of who initiated the activities, staff or child, was about equal’ (p. vi). Furthermore, the study concluded that ‘children’s cognitive outcomes appear to be directly related to the quantity and quality of the teacher/adult-planned and -initiated focused group work’ (p. vi).

Encouraging practitioners to provide adult-led activities marks a distinct pedagogical difference between the EYFS and Te Whāriki. The provision of adult-led literacy-related activities, particularly for three- and four-year-olds, is likely to result in greater opportunities for literacy learning than is possible with the strategies outlined in Te Whāriki. Given that Te Whāriki is said to be a sociocultural document, it is somewhat ironic that the value of adult-led activities is not more clearly acknowledged. A sociocultural approach is not just about teachers and children interacting within social contexts. A sociocultural approach allows for teachers, as ‘more knowledgeable others’, to engage children in meaningful activities and to teach them specific skills in appropriate ways (Daniels, 2001). This could include the planning and implementation of teacher-led activities aimed at enhancing the early literacy skills of particular children.

**Assessment**

*Te Whāriki* includes some general statements about assessment (see Ministry of Education, 1996) but contains no requirement to assess any specific learning outcomes for children. Additional information on assessment is available in *Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2009). The Ministry of Education has devoted large amounts of funding towards developing and promoting *Kei Tua o te Pae* but the value of the resource is limited by its almost exclusive focus on one type of assessment, namely learning stories.
Learning stories are an innovative form of assessment developed by Margaret Carr (1998; 2001). The technique requires a teacher to first observe a child engaged in a particular experience. The teacher then writes a narrative ‘story’ that documents the learning that is said to have occurred in the observed context. The focus of a learning story is meant to be on a child’s dispositions, rather than on knowledge and skills.

Despite their widespread use in New Zealand, there is little research evidence that learning stories are an effective way of assessing the complexities of children’s learning. A particular concern is that learning stories have not been shown to be suitable for showing changes in individual children’s learning over time. Learning stories tend to be situation-specific and are dependent on the subjective interpretation of a teacher (see Blaiklock, 2008; Blaiklock, 2010).

The literacy-related learning stories in Kei Tua o te Pae (see Book 17, Ministry of Education, 2009) provide some anecdotal descriptions of children listening to storybooks and being involved in early writing. However, no examples are provided to show how children’s literacy knowledge develops over time. Furthermore, Kei Tua o te Pae, and other published guidelines on learning stories (for example, Carr, 1998; Carr, 2001) contain no suggestions to ensure that literacy learning is assessed at any point before a child begins school. Hence it is quite possible for early childhood centres in New Zealand to avoid making any assessment of children’s early literacy skills.

The EYFS provides a much more systematic approach to assessment than is found in New Zealand. Assessment is both formative and summative. Formative assessment is ongoing and is based on observations of children in daily activities. Information from parents is also taken into account.

Guidelines on assessment are provided in the Practice guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). As discussed earlier, Practice guidance includes descriptions of specific areas of learning that may typically occur during particular age ranges. The descriptions of early literacy development can help teachers to be aware of what a child may be learning. Alongside the descriptions of learning are ‘look, listen and note’ pointers that provide additional information about what teachers can observe.

Teachers are informed that ‘these sections are not intended to be exhaustive—different children will do different things at different times—and they should not be used as checklists’ (p. 5). Additional information on how teachers can gather and use assessment information to support children’s learning is provided in the guidebook, Progress matters: Reviewing and enhancing young children’s development (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009b).

Summative assessment occurs when children are at the end of the EYFS. Teachers are required to complete the EYFS profile to provide a summary of observations and assessments of a child’s learning up to that point. Children’s progress is recorded on scales that are derived from the final early learning goals. The completed EYFS profile is made available to parents and to the teacher of the class when the child starts school.

In summary, it is apparent that the EYFS provides considerably more guidance on assessing early literacy than is available in Te Whāriki or Kei Tua o te Pae. The differences in assessment requirements may have implications for the provision of learning experiences. Knowing that literacy-related skills are to be assessed may help EYFS teachers to be aware of opportunities to enhance children’s literacy skills. In New Zealand, the opposite scenario may exist. The lack of guidance given to New Zealand teachers may signal to them that literacy is not an important learning area during the early childhood years.

**Conclusion**

*Te Whāriki* and the EYFS show very different approaches to early literacy. *Te Whāriki* has few outcomes related to literacy, whereas the EYFS has many. *Te Whāriki* provides little information on how to plan and implement literacy activities, whereas the EYFS and associated resources contain detailed guidance. *Te Whāriki* has no requirements to assess literacy learning, whereas the EYFS requires formative and summative assessments.

It could be argued that the guidance the EYFS provides on early literacy amounts to a prescriptive approach that allows teachers little freedom in designing their programs. The EYFS, however, also emphasises the importance of teachers responding to individual children’s needs and interests. Although there are many suggestions regarding what teachers can do, teacher ideas and initiatives are also seen as crucial.

It could also be argued that the emphasis the EYFS gives to academic outcomes is at the cost of attention to other areas of children’s wellbeing. Including a focus on content learning, however, does not need to take away from the importance of other aspects of children’s development. A focus on both academic and social skills has been found to be a feature of high-quality early education programs (American Educational Research Association, 2005; National Research Council, 2001).

One of the guiding principles of *Te Whāriki* is ‘empowerment’. This is further described as assisting ‘children and their families to develop independence and to access the resources necessary to enable them to direct their own lives’ (Ministry of Education,
Although early literacy skills receive little emphasis in Te Whāriki, becoming literate is a key way to empower children. Tunmer and Prochnow (2009) suggest that:

...literacy should be conceptualised as a fundamental enabling skill, a tool by which readers can acquire the knowledge necessary for participating fully in the processes of society (social, cultural, and political) and for achieving their personal goals and developing their potential. ... The literate person can read to learn and write to influence (p. 182).

The literacy skills that children develop in the early childhood years are crucial for their later literacy success. A New Zealand longitudinal study by Tunmer, Chapman, and Prochnow (2006) found that measures of literacy-related skills at school entry (including phonological and grammatical awareness, letter knowledge, and vocabulary) accounted for nearly half of the variance in reading comprehension seven years later, even after controlling for socioeconomic status. Numerous international studies have also found that what children know about literacy-related areas before they start school has a significant impact on their progress in learning to read and write (see National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Given this research evidence, and given the example of a greater emphasis on literacy in the EYFS, it is time for the New Zealand early childhood profession to reconsider whether Te Whāriki is really providing effective guidance about how to help children get off to a good start in reading and writing.

References


Defining and assessing the school readiness of Indigenous Australian children

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THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE THAT underpins the school readiness of Indigenous Australian children is reviewed in this article, followed by identification of issues requiring research attention. Two key questions are considered:

1. How is school readiness defined and how applicable are definitions to Indigenous contexts?
2. What methods of school readiness assessment are applied to Indigenous children and are the tools appropriate or effective?

General definitions of school readiness are outlined. An ecological view defines school readiness as ready services, schools, communities and families. This view is scrutinised in detail to consider whether services, schools and communities are ready to promote Indigenous children’s education. Extended families are pivotal social constructions in many Indigenous contexts. The extent to which this is recognised in the ecological view of school readiness is assessed. Thereafter, the methods of assessing children’s school readiness are reviewed, highlighting the shortfall in techniques specifically designed and validated for Indigenous Australians and the variable applicability of the techniques currently in use.

Introduction

This article summarises a comprehensive literature review of school readiness for Australian Indigenous children (McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson & Carapetis, 2008). It considers definitions and evidence for the effectiveness of approaches to assessment of school readiness; the review includes English language literature on the school readiness of the Australian Indigenous population, along with supporting evidence from the international literature on comparable indigenous populations. Significant examples of ‘grey literature’ from government and non-government organisations’ websites are cited to supplement peer-reviewed academic research.

Defining school readiness of Australian Indigenous children

The term ‘school readiness’ is often misunderstood because of a tendency to confuse readiness to learn (having the cognitive capacity to undertake learning of specific material) with readiness for school (the ability to make the transition to school-based learning, to meet school requirements and to assimilate curriculum) (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). The prerequisites for schooling also include social skills: the capacity to follow directions, knowing not to be disruptive in class and how to be sensitive to others (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani & Merali, 2007; Rhode Island Kids Count, 2005; Wright, Diener & Kay, 2000).

School readiness should be distinguished from age, which is the basis of policy determining access to or legal requirement for schooling. Although in this sense, age is a criterion for attending school (Dockett et al., 2008), it is not a reliable predictor of success in school (Meisels, 1999 in Dockett & Perry, 2002) or consequently of ‘school readiness’. In fact, the actual age of school commencement is variable: ‘… in most States, there can be a chronological age span of some two years as children start school between about four-and-a-half and six years old’ (Elliott, 2006, p. 17).
Most importantly, children of the same age are often not at the same developmental stage and development occurs at different rates in different domains (DEST, 2005a). The understanding of the contribution of early life experiences to development and the neuroscience of learning are reflected in the common theme in recent literature that school readiness should be seen as a ‘holistic’ concept, incorporating cognitive, socio-emotional and physical domains (Janus & Offord, 2007). Accordingly, five domains of school readiness are consistently outlined: motor development, emotional health, social knowledge, language skills and general knowledge (ARACY, 2007; Arnold et al., 2007; Janus & Offord, 2007).

An ‘ecological’ view of school readiness encompasses more than the skills and attributes of the individual child, focusing instead on the influence of family, community, school, and services on children’s readiness for school (ARACY, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Ready services deliver quality and affordable proven school readiness programs, ready schools foster relationships with families and communities and are geared and resourced for child development, ready communities provide appropriate support and resources to families, and ready families create facilitative home environments (Rhode Island Kids Count, 2005; Kagan & Rigby, 2003).

Research evidence on the contribution of ready services, schools, communities and families to the school readiness of Indigenous children is considered in the following sections. For the purposes of the review, we defined research evidence broadly, to include the outcomes of evaluations or trials based on formal measures applied to school performance on any of a range of dimensions, with or without statistical controls; evidence from qualitative studies, including case studies, was included if these were based on explicitly defined methods of observation and analysis.

‘Indigenous people … live across a very different range of geographical settings … [and] experience a range of different lifestyles … the complex and often delicate nature of the social and cultural issues at play within and between these communities is critical if Aboriginal learners are to achieve equitable educational outcomes’ (Clancy & Simpson, 2002, pp. 54–5). Accordingly, it is inappropriate to accept broad generalisations about Indigenous cultures (or any cultures) (Hanlen, 2007; Martin, 2007) and important to determine how an ecological definition of school readiness accommodates the contextual diversity and heterogeneity of Indigenous cultures and settings. How does the ecological definition of school readiness accord with Indigenous Australian contexts?

Ready families
Families contribute directly to children’s cognitive and social-emotional development. Opinion, backed by some research, indicates that the distinctive characteristics of Aboriginal family systems contribute to school readiness (Martin, 2007). The ‘Footprints in Time’ longitudinal study of Indigenous children (FaCSIA, 2006) used focus groups and in-depth interviews with community elders, parents and carers, children, service providers and other stakeholders in the Torres Strait region, and found that ‘children have a number of people watching over their growth and development who help to teach them life skills, and endeavour to keep them on track’ (FaCSIA, 2006, p. 7). For Indigenous people, as for many ethnic groups, extended families constitute a valuable source of social and cultural capital, linking people to networks that cushion against financial hardship through the sharing of resources (Daly & Smith, 2005). Extended families are perceived to be the main source of parental awareness of available services and supports (SNAICC, 2004a).

However, given the poor levels of Indigenous service access (COAG, 2009), there is as much to suggest that parental and child dependence on extended families does not actually increase awareness of and access to services for children. Although school engagement of families is receiving increasing policy attention through the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), evidence for the most effective approaches in the Australian context remains limited.

‘Evidence shows that early childhood programs are most effective when they support parents’ active participation in their children’s development’ (COAG, 2009, p. 6). A key function of parents in assisting the successful transition to school is through support of child development before and after the first school term (Arnold et al., 2007) by reading to children at home (ARACY, 2007; DEST, 2005b). A study (Burgess, 2005) in the United States of 493 Caucasian teenage mothers with diverse socioeconomic status established that teenage mothers are less well equipped to provide effective learning contexts. Another US study (Wright et al., 2000) examined the school readiness of 885 children from 11 Utah schools, 52 per cent of whom would qualify for bilingual education. Qualitative evidence suggests that parents had low expectations of their children’s education and lacked the personal attributes and resources at home to support school readiness. Similarly, it has been suggested that there is a lack of positive role modelling by Indigenous parents whose own education was limited (McGarigle & Nelson, 2006). However, no studies comparing Indigenous children’s school outcomes with their parents’ educational attainment were found.

Ready schools
It is the ‘responsibility of schools to be ready for children: to offer them a supportive environment that enables them to blossom and learn effectively’
(Arnold et al., 2007, p. 3). Qualitative evidence from a longitudinal study of 152 Indigenous students identified ‘school environment’ during the first two years of schooling as an important predictor of literacy and numeracy achievement (Frigo et al., 2004). However, the authors did not define what constituted ‘school environment’. Key factors associated with school success in this study included: i) strong leadership with proactive relationship building and a commitment to continuous improvement; ii) teachers’ genuine valuing of the experiences and qualities that students brought with them; iii) attendance and engagement; and iv) Indigenous presence in school to support the trust and active engagement of parents (Frigo et al., 2004).

That these factors make schools ready for Indigenous students is concluded by working papers (Arnold et al., 2007), position statements (NAEYC, 2005) and opinion pieces (Briggs & Potter, 1999), which suggest that children need to feel welcome and included in their school regardless of culture or ethnicity. An earlier qualitative study based on interviews of Indigenous students, parents/carers, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff in 44 schools across Australia (Arnold, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000) confirmed the importance to Indigenous children of feeling welcome and included in their school.

Children’s educational opportunities are greatly enhanced when parents have confidence in the principal and teachers at their child’s school (DEST, 2005a). Accordingly, Indigenous parents interviewed in a study in Queensland reported it was crucial that teachers showed respect and provided an open door to them. Waller (1994) also identified this as important in an appraisal of earlier programs.

In Australia, there is some qualitative evidence that Indigenous cultural presence in schools encourages a ‘sense of belonging’ amongst Indigenous students (Losey, 1995). This is supported by other evidence: a survey of 34 key stakeholders from Indigenous organisations specialising in family welfare (SNAICC, 2004b); case studies with Indigenous children (Frigo and Adams, 2002); and interviews with teachers, Indigenous children and their parents (Dockett, Mason & Perry, 2006). However, interviews with Indigenous respondents suggest that ‘culture and traditions have been lost for most Indigenous children and young people’ (SNAICC, 2004b, p. 10), which adds to the diversity of family cultural adaptations to which schools need to respond in order to improve belonging and inclusion, and therefore Indigenous educational outcomes.

Qualitative studies (Dockett et al., 2006; Frigo & Adams, 2002) advocate an Indigenous staff presence, in the form of teachers, tutors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers (AIEWs). In their study of 13 schools, Frigo and Adams (2002) found that Indigenous staff presence was not standardised, since ‘schools variably employed AIEWs, Indigenous ATAS tutors (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) and Indigenous teachers and one had an Indigenous principal’. One school with 19 Indigenous staff had seen an increase in Indigenous enrolment, programs and events (Frigo & Adams, 2002, p. 12). In an analysis of census data, Biddle (2007) found the presence of an Indigenous preschool worker had a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of Indigenous children attending preschool. This review found no studies about the effects of the employment of Indigenous staff in schools on the education attainment of Indigenous children.

International research on teachers’ perceptions of American Indian and Alaskan Native students suggests a strong association between positive attitudes to learning and cognitive skill development (Marks & Garcia-Coll, 2007). While we found no directly comparable research for Australian Indigenous populations, qualitative research suggests that positive self-identities (Purdie et al., 2000) and attitudes toward school among Indigenous students (Dockett et al., 2006) aid their school success. It is argued that Indigenous children develop a more positive self-concept as students when teachers encourage their academic achievement early on in their schooling (Purdie et al., 2000). Therefore, it may be appropriate that Frigo et al. (2004) and Dockett et al. (2006) found qualitative evidence implying that the way teachers value Indigenous knowledge and skills, and the relative expectations that teachers have of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, is influential.

The Australian literature on strategies that will improve school readiness for Indigenous children has mostly been based on qualitative perceptions and informed opinion rather than on research-derived evidence. ‘Culturally appropriate’ teaching is frequently promoted and the need for further research is often stressed (Adams, 1998; Frigo & Adams, 2002; Hanlen, 2007; Purdie et al., 2000; SNAICC, 2004b; Thorpe et al., 2005; Waller, 1994). However, there is little consensus regarding the meaning of ‘cultural appropriateness’, let alone evidence for the impact or effectiveness of particular strategies. Hanlen (2007) has suggested that employment of ‘environmental literacies [which] may be defined as the knowledge and understandings that people use to read and interpret the natural world’ may be important (Hanlen, 2007, p. 234).

Similarly, using the outdoor environment as a teaching resource, with which Indigenous children are perceived to have a strong affinity (Martin, 2007; Waller, 1994) has been promoted as a way of improving the cultural appropriateness of curricula.

Culturally appropriate teaching is a key constituent in the ‘Incredible Years’ classroom social skills and problem-solving child training program. This curriculum (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004) has been applied in a
social skills program in Queensland with a total sample of 647 preschool children, including 24 Indigenous children (Homel et al., 2006). Unfortunately, it is not possible to isolate its effectiveness in Indigenous contexts from the other ethnic groups in the study.

**Ready communities**

A recent review states that ‘school readiness is an outcome of the resources (including knowledge and skills), attitudes (including priorities) and relationships of a community’ (ARACY, 2007, p. 9). Kagan & Rigby (2003) suggest that ‘ready’ communities should have access to, and prioritise the use of, community-based health services and provide safe, supportive and nurturing environments. We have found no studies that identify examples of ready Indigenous communities and that quantify the effect of their attributes on school readiness, so it is helpful to examine how closely Indigenous communities match the attributes outlined by Kagan & Rigby (2003).

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) and other secondary quantitative data for the Northern Territory define alcohol and drug abuse as widespread (Li, Guthridge, Tursan D’espaïnegt & Paterson, 2006; Zubrick et al., 2004). Furthermore, ‘children’s exposure to … domestic violence … can be considered as a form of emotional abuse’ (NTDHCS, 2004, p. 13) and domestic violence has been highlighted as a problem in Indigenous communities (Bolger, 1991; SNAICC, 2004b; Wild & Anderson, 2007). A report (Tomison, 2004) suggests ‘there would appear to be a clear need for more extensive and consistent assessment of the nature and extent of violence in Aboriginal communities’ (Tomison, 2004, p. 58).

The proportion of Indigenous children on care and protection orders may indicate other aspects of the problem. This is higher than for non-Indigenous children in New South Wales and Queensland (NSW Commission for Children and Young People and Commission for Children and Young People (Qld), 2004) and in the Northern Territory in 2003–04, ‘Aboriginal children were 4.7 times more likely than other children to be the subject of a substantiated child protection notification’ (NTDHCS, 2004, p. 8).

Life stressors identified in WAACHS and other comparable research clearly impact adversely on the school readiness of Indigenous children. Moreover, low levels of Indigenous parental education (Daly & Smith, 2005; Devitt, Hall & Tsey, 2001), may suggest a lower capacity of Indigenous parents to support their children’s schooling, both directly and indirectly (through attention to health and personal care). However, the evidence for the effectiveness of strategies to improve parental input to school readiness is at best equivocal and limited to the evaluation of various locally implemented projects with different strategies for community input and control (Blitner et al., 2000). For example, research in Gapuwiyak, Northern Territory (Smith et al., 2002) suggests that intervention success is favoured by community involvement in design and implementation. This study sought to promote child growth through the partial formation of a ‘Family Centre’ strategy, incorporating a playgroup, preschool, and parental education and nutritional supplementation programs. However, this study did not explore how community attributes or research practices promote school readiness, nor did it identify how their success may be exported elsewhere. There is at present only limited evidence regarding the contribution of parenting to Indigenous school readiness derived from parenting intervention trials.

Community leadership is potentially important for the capacity of communities to improve children’s school readiness. Indigenous elders and parents are perceived to express deep concern about child health and wellbeing (Dockett et al., 2006; FaCS, 2002). However, service access is linked to community size, since a critical population mass is required to make service provision viable (FaSoLi, 2007). Accordingly, Indigenous qualitative interviews and focus groups highlight the inaccessibility of services, particularly in remote locations (FaCS, 2006). Additionally, quantitative evidence gathered in the WAACHS suggests that nutritious food is not widely available in many Indigenous communities (Zubrick et al., 2004).

**Ready services**

We found very little research evidence regarding the contribution of services to the school readiness of Indigenous children. Research trials relating to the effectiveness of preventive interventions on early learning and development or behaviour problems, as measured through teachers’ reports, exist for the general population, but only to a limited extent for Indigenous populations (Reid, Littlefield & Hammond, 2008; Robinson & Tyler, 2006; Robinson et al., 2009; Sanders, 2003; Turner, Richards & Sanders, 2007).

Literature reviews and discussions have advocated research on the benefits of services in some key areas: interventions to improve parenting (Robinson, 2005; SNAICC, 2004a); measures to improve continuity between preschool and school (NTDE, 1999); and improved access to structured preschool programs (McRae et al., 2000). Arnold et al. (2007) advocate a ‘transition’ policy framework linking early childhood development programs to the early years of school.
Assessing school readiness of Australian Indigenous children

Developmental screening of individual children provides assessment of anthropometric indices (e.g., weight to height ratio), vision and hearing, gross motor, language and socioemotional competencies (Meisels, 1988). Currently, a variety of developmental screening tools are in use, including the Victorian ‘Parent Evaluation of Development Status’ questionnaire (PEDS) (ARACY, 2007; CCCH, 2007). A study by CCCH (2007) reports that Australia lacks a systematic national approach to the detection of emerging problems among children aged between 18 months and three years, a crucial period of a child’s development. It states that such a strategy may be undermined by geographical unevenness of service distribution (especially in remote Australia, where Indigenous children predominate) and by variation in staff ability to reliably administer such a tool and interpret results (which may be more problematic for Indigenous children). The implementation or adaptation of a model of assessment suitable for the Australian context has not been undertaken. The current review has not identified any studies assessing the applicability of standardised developmental screening measures for Indigenous Australian children aged 18 months to three years, or any evidence either for or against the suitability of parental questionnaires on Indigenous child-rearing styles within extended family contexts.

School readiness tests define school entry characteristics and assess curriculum-based skills and are a prerequisite for specific instructional programs as well as aiding curriculum design (Meisels, 1988). The need for readiness assessments that are not culturally biased is highlighted by research evidence that teachers refer to students’ home language skills as ‘bad or poor English’ (Frigo et al., 2004, p. 53). In a review of Indigenous assessment, Freebody (2007) states that literacy and assessment are intrinsically linked, since different kinds of assessments measure different kinds of literacies. It is unlikely that assessment in Australian Standard English leads to accurate appraisal of the school readiness or academic achievement equally for non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, or across the Indigenous population. Reviewing United States school readiness assessment results, Rock and Stenner (2005) determined that different tests resulted in different gaps in the prediction of school readiness between ethnic groups and that the ‘Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test–Revised’ resulted in a larger gap in black-white prediction of school readiness and lower accuracy across sample populations compared to other tests. This problem is recognised by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) who state: ‘...assessments that are psychometrically, linguistically, culturally, and developmentally appropriate ... are urgently needed in each of the hundreds of languages represented in early education settings in the U.S. (NAEYC, 2005, p. 39).

The guidelines in the document ‘Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners’ are for assessing learners whose home language is not English (NAEYC, 2005). This review has not identified any similar set of assessment guidelines for the Australian context, although the lack of appropriate assessment strategies is equally evident from the diversity of the tools employed in studies reviewed later in this section. The literature on Australian Indigenous assessment recommends that assessment tools for Indigenous school readiness take a dual-language approach wherever possible (Freebody, 2007) and promote collaboration with Indigenous researchers in the design and application of assessment tools. It is also recognised that there are concerns about culture and skills surrounding the participation of Indigenous parents in assessment (Frigo et al., 2004; Marks, Moyer, Roche & Graham, 2003; Purdie et al., 2000).

Few studies have attempted to assess Indigenous children using tools specifically validated for the purpose. One such study evaluated a school-based behavioural intervention on the Tiwi islands, Northern Territory (Robinson & Tyler, 2006). Instruments measuring children’s internalising and externalising behaviours were adapted in the course of an intervention trial and the final version validated with a random sample of 57 Indigenous Tiwi primary school children. The same instrument is now being used in conjunction with the ‘Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire’ (SDQ) (Goodman, 2001; Goodman, Meltzer & Bailey, 1998) for assessment of four- to six-year-old Indigenous children in a preschool trial (Robinson et al., 2009).

Three studies were identified that assessed Indigenous children independently, but did not employ assessment tools validated for Indigenous children. The ACER ‘Longitudinal English Literacy and Numeracy Survey’ (LLANS) has been applied to a cohort of 152 Indigenous students in Years One and Three of school (Frigo et al., 2004). LLANS assessment tasks are considered to be consistent with good assessment practice for Indigenous students, and, since three students who spoke an Indigenous language and one who spoke only Aboriginal English were amongst 11 Indigenous LLANS ‘high achievers’, LLANS may have the potential to be a culturally appropriate assessment device.

In their qualitative study of the effect of self-identity on Indigenous students’ educational outcomes (Purdie et al., 2000), scales designed to measure ethnic identity were used to construct a simplified version of a self-concept instrument entitled ‘How I feel about me’. The tool was applied in both Indigenous (n = 194) and non-Indigenous groups (n = 43). This was used to ‘challenge
the popular view that Indigenous students have lower self-concepts than non-Indigenous students’. However, the ‘need for a specific instrument to be developed for Indigenous Australians ... in consultation with Indigenous researchers’ is stressed (Purdie et al., 2000, pp. 32, 33).

The ‘100 Children go to School’ study (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 1998; 2002) assessed literacy precursors using materials that were expected to be familiar from children’s homes, including items based on photographs of familiar food items, toys, retail signs and a ‘junk mail’ Christmas toy catalogue. This pre-and post-study included only four Indigenous children. However, the research group gave considerable thought to the cultural suitability of tests (Hill & Louden, 1999). With regard to Indigenous and ethnic minority students, the researchers suggest: ‘Teachers and researchers need to learn more about how children live in homes and communities. We don’t know enough about the complexity of networks which support families with minimal economic resources, their sophisticated multilingual and multi-modal language use and production’ (Hill & Louden, 1999, p. 18).

There is a pressing requirement for research on the assessment of Indigenous children’s school readiness and the design and validation of Indigenous-specific assessment tools. There are promising signs that appropriate assessment tools are being developed. A new diagnostic tool to assess the learning needs of Indigenous students starting school, longitudinal assessment of individual and group growth, and identification of students requiring additional support in literacy and numeracy are incorporated as part of the implementation of ‘Prep’ year in Queensland (DEA, 2005). The Cape York Institute (2007) has called for similar assessment strategies to be applied across the first three years of schooling.

Conclusions

Given the broad diversity of cultures, including those of Indigenous Australia, there is no concise definition of school readiness, let alone one that is relevant. However, there is general agreement that school readiness is multi-dimensional and that an adequate definition must refer to five developmental domains (motor development, emotional health, social knowledge, language skills and general knowledge). An ecological conception of school readiness is also constituted with reference to diverse ecological domains: ready families; ready communities; ready schools; and ready services. There is a distinctive lack of rigorous research that addresses what these domains of school readiness constitute for Indigenous children. Qualitative evidence suggests that the conception of ready families or ready communities is particularly important for Indigenous contexts. Interview material suggests that ready schools situate Indigenous culture at the centre of curricula, value the skills Indigenous children bring to school, and employ Indigenous staff.

There is a perception that mainstream assessment tools are not effective and undervalue Indigenous skills, values and development. The diverse range of developmental screening and school readiness assessment tools available for application has rarely been validated, much less systematically adopted within Indigenous contexts in cross-contextually appropriate ways. Indigenous language skills are inappropriately assessed or are seldom employed effectively. More effective measures are required in order to support the accurate identification of Standard Australian English and other language acquisition by Indigenous children. The inclusion of Indigenous communities and professionals in assessment design may improve the process. Creating standardised, externally comparable and culturally appropriate measures for the assessment of Indigenous children are areas where further research is required.

The current policy direction and investment through Commonwealth–State agreements places emphasis on early childhood and ‘closing the gap’ on the life outcomes of Australian Indigenous children, including their education (COAG, 2009). This review illustrates that, if policy is to truly contribute to improving the school readiness of Indigenous children, a great deal of further research is required to reduce the gaps in genuine evidence for the effectiveness of these strategies.

References


Introduction

This article focuses on the reading choices of young Aboriginal children. The study was conducted in a rural township in close proximity to Aboriginal Homelands with a high proportion of Aboriginal families. It involved a literacy researcher, an Aboriginal researcher with strong connections to the research site, and an early childhood researcher who acted as critical friend and reviewed the data, participated in the analysis and commented on the findings. In this way, there were three diverse viewpoints brought to the research: literacy, Aboriginality, and early childhood. From a literacy perspective, the research into connections between oral language narrative patterns, print literacy and children's books was highlighted. The Aboriginal perspective highlighted the importance of cultural authorisation principles; for example reciprocity, joint ownership, mutual obligations and benefits for both the research project and the community. The Aboriginal researcher contributed local cultural knowledge, knowledge of family practices and an understanding of the complexity of living within several competing worlds, along with the undisputed need to improve the literacy learning of young Aboriginal children. The critical early childhood perspective contributed knowledge of cultural diversity and understanding of dominant privileged views of how hegemony works in unconscious ways, particularly in early childhood research.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it builds knowledge about the development of literacy experiences of Aboriginal children from birth to six years (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2001). Second, it provides new insights into home literacy activities. Third, it provides information about preschool and early years home practices for the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2000).

Background and significance

In the wealth of research into storybook reading, shared reading and storytelling to young children, a review of 454 peer-reviewed journal articles by Aram (2008) revealed that researchers have paid little attention to how parents select books for children and the different genres parents choose to read. There is a scarcity of literature on what parents and caregivers read with preschool children and why (Wilkinson, 2003). More importantly for this study, there were no reported studies on what young Indigenous children choose to read or have read to them.

A further meta-analysis of research studies confirmed the importance of early book-reading experiences of young children in underpinning their cognitive, social and literacy development (Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995). In the Progress in International Reading Literacy
Study (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007) it is reported that the presence of children's books in the home shows a strong positive relationship with reading achievement. The average reading achievement difference between students from homes with many children's books (more than 100) and those from homes with few children's books (10 or fewer) was very large (91 score points, almost 1 standard deviation). Exposure to books in early childhood is linked to later school achievement (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008), and young children's receptive vocabulary, narrative production and emergent literacy have been found to be highly predictive of their scores on reading comprehension and receptive vocabulary in fourth and seventh grade (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill, 1991). Young children need to have control over several aspects of oral language before starting the beginning-to-read process: phonology, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and pragmatics (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). The size of children's vocabulary at age three is strongly associated with learning to read and reading comprehension at the end of third grade (Hart & Risley, 2003). Regarding children who speak several languages, young children's oral language vocabulary acquisition is enhanced through the shared reading of picture books either in English or their primary language (Roberts, 2008).

The literacy levels of Aboriginal children are precariously low, and 'seven out of every ten Indigenous students in Year 3 are below the national literacy standard, compared to just three out of ten for other Australians' (Kemp in Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2000, p. 3). While many excellent early childhood literacy programs operate in more remote Aboriginal communities and in various rural and urban districts, there have been no previous studies into what young Aboriginal children choose to read and the ways reading is undertaken by significant others. Additionally, there is wide invisibility of Indigenous cultures in book collections and classrooms in Australia generally (Boutte, Hopkins & Waklatsi, 2008).

The research questions guiding this study were:

- What books do young Aboriginal children choose to read in homes?
- Who chooses what is read to young Aboriginal children?
- In what ways is reading undertaken by significant others?
- What are the parameters governing the availability of reading material for young Aboriginal children?

**Approach and methods**

Data was gathered by an Aboriginal researcher from the study area paired with a non-Aboriginal researcher (Colbung, Glover, Rau & Ritchie, 2007). A case study approach using multiple methods of data collection was employed (Gregory, William, Baker & Street, 2004; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Data collection methods included parent/caregiver interviews, the My Favourite Book Checklist, photographs of children and families reading the books, and observations of reading material in the home. Importantly, family members were involved as data collectors of children's book choices.

The research took place 800 kilometres from the state capital city and involved 20 Aboriginal families with children aged three to six years, making a sample of approximately 40 children. The selected families met the single criterion of having children within the identified age range. The rural study site was selected because it is considered neither remote nor urban and contains a diversity of Aboriginal families. Families differed in their socioeconomic status, home language use and use of early childhood services. Some families had children attending the local childcare centre; other families did not participate in formal early childhood programs and lived out of the township, some on Aboriginal Homelands, and there were families who had older children attending the local area school and/or independent school. This diversity of families meant that the children were involved in a range of early learning experiences. The local Aboriginal childcare centre was pivotal to the study, recruiting many of the participating families, acting as a collection point for the cameras and advocating for the study.

Three home visits were conducted. The first entailed seeking families’ agreement to be involved and sharing information about the study, including shared expectations. The second visit involved the researchers interviewing and recording parents’ responses to the home literacy survey, based on the international Learning to Read Survey, PIRLS (Mullis et al., 2007; De Bortoli & Cresswell, 2004). The survey allowed data to be collected on the languages spoken in the home, the amount of time parents read to their children, the number of books in the home and the number of children's books. It also asked the parents to comment on their education level and their view of their financial situation. On this visit, the two researchers delivered the My Favourite Book Collection, which contained 25 books for children aged three to six years. The plan was for the families to read the books over a two- to three-week period. Family members were invited to take photographs of the children engaging with the books, as well as complete the My Favourite Book Checklist. Families were provided with two disposable cameras, which were later collected and two sets of photographs developed. The My Favourite Book Checklist contained the title of the books, space to record the number of times each book was read, the name of the person who selected the book to be read, and the children's rating of the book from 1 to 5 (see Appendix 1). The photographs and the My Favourite Book Checklist were used as discussion prompts during the third home visit.
During the third and final home visit, the researchers interviewed the parents/caregivers and the children to further explore children’s choice of texts, which may have been additional books in the home, popular culture, magazines and different forms of environmental print (Pahl, 2002). Following the final home visit and completion of the data gathering, the My Favourite Book Collection was retained by the family, as was one set of photographs. The provision of books demonstrated reciprocal action and mutual benefits fundamental to the focus and success of the project.

**Book selection**

The book selection for the My Favourite Book Collection (see Appendix 1) was influenced by research into children’s reading choices (Harris, 2008) and the developmental continuum of children’s narrative skills (Stadler & Ward, 2005). The book selection was undertaken by the Little Big Book Club, a non-for-profit arts organisation committed to the promotion of early literacy, literature and Australian authors and illustrators. The selection also incorporated books from the Indigenous Literacy Project Book Buzz (2008), an early literacy project which provides sets of 12 early childhood books to children in several remote communities. There were 20 books in the initial My Favourite Book Collection, comprising popular early childhood books with simple narrative structures including descriptions, descriptive sequences and simple cause-and-effect plots; for example, books such as *The very hungry caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell and *Where is the green sheep?* by Mem Fox and Judy Horacek. Several books contained interactive devices such as sound effects and flaps to encourage interaction between parents/caregivers and children (Smith, 2001). There were also several books by Indigenous authors or with specific Indigenous content. At the research site, in keeping with the collaborative and reciprocal nature of the study, the childcare centre staff requested that five locally written and photographed books were included, making a total of 25 in the My Favourite Book Collection.

**Data analysis and findings**

Data analysis involved reviewing the parents’ responses to the home literacy survey, and analysing the My Favourite Book Checklist (the family record of what books children selected to be read and who read to the children), the researchers’ field notes, interviews with parents in the home and the photographs taken by families.

The initial home literacy survey from 20 families revealed that some families have fewer than 10 children’s books in the home, while others have up to 20. There was also diversity in the amount of time parents spend reading with their children and the amount of time parents themselves spend reading in the home, with nearly all parents reporting they spend less than one hour per week reading at home. Overall, the initial home literacy survey revealed that parents had high aspirations for their young children and placed high importance on books and reading for a good start in literacy.

To explore the research questions ‘What books do young Aboriginal children choose to read in homes?’ and ‘Who chooses what is read to young Aboriginal children?’, the results of the My Favourite Book Checklist were collated and tallied. The tally of books selected and read over the two-week period revealed that a total of 1025 books was read by families. The books chosen to be read fell into two main groups: those read most frequently and those read only once or possibly twice, or not at all in some families. The book *Kisses for Daddy* was the favourite book, with 150 readings. *The very hungry caterpillar* and several other books were also read repeatedly.

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**Figure 1:** The children’s favourite books
A large number of books (15 out of the 25) were read only once or twice. The books in the non-favourite group included those written specifically for the local community. To further examine the features and format of the books that young Aboriginal children prefer, sets of two different books on the same topic, one with Indigenous content and the other with non-Indigenous content, were compared. On the third visit, researchers asked the children which book in the pair they liked best. Overall, the children preferred bright, cartoon-style books with cut-outs and flaps, rather than books with specific Indigenous content.

To explore the research question ‘In what ways is reading undertaken by significant others? (parents, grandparents, preschool teacher, teachers, siblings)’ the photographs taken by 15 Aboriginal family members were examined. The photographs were taken by the children, older siblings, neighbours and parents/caregivers. They were used as discussion prompts with parents to further explore the children’s book choices and who selected the books to be read. The three researchers later analysed the photographs to explore: Who is in the photograph?; What social interactions are apparent in the photographs?; Where did the reading take place?; What else was happening?

**Who is in the photo?**

The photographs showed many different people reading to the children: fathers, other family members and neighbours. A strong pattern was older brothers and sisters reading to younger children. The reading was rarely a one-to-one activity, with many younger and older children and neighbours shown in the photographs. There were a few photographs of a child reading a book alone while an older sibling or a parent took the photograph, but, overall, reading was a shared activity.

**What social interactions were apparent in the photographs?**

There was not a consistent pattern of one-to-one adult–child interaction in the book reading, as many individuals took on the role of reader. The interactions around the books were at times adult–child, sometimes child–child or child–group of children; sometimes the father or mother read, sometimes grandparents, aunties or visitors read. The photographs showed children pointing to the pages of the book, and conversations between the reader and the child/ren. The child or children being read to appeared to be talking about the book rather than passively listening.

Book reading, as shown in the photographs and in the observations made during the home visits, revealed that it was usually something that happened along with a lot of other activity, with numerous activities occurring simultaneously. Family members and visitors in the house watched television or DVDs, or played music or computer games, while another group was reading. In most homes, people came and went, moving in to listen for a while without any expectation that anyone would stay and listen for the whole reading time. The young children moved in and out of the book reading as well. Even when two children read their own books, side-by-side, one was looking at the other child’s book and talking about it to the reader. The photographs showed that the mainstream, bed-time reading experience of one parent reading to one child rarely took place. This is similar to the findings of Hill and Nichols (2008) which demonstrated considerable diversity in the literacy interactions in busy families rather than one idealised bed-time reading pattern.

**Where did the reading take place?**

The photographs showed children reading on the trampoline, on the floor, at tables, on sofas and outside on the verandah. One parent took a photo of the child reading in the car as the family set off on an 800-kilometre trip to visit other family members. For this family and some others, the books went in the car when the family travelled.

The following three case studies of participating families, two living on Aboriginal Homelands and one in the rural township, reveal some of the home literacy practices of young Aboriginal children.

**Alice 4 and Jeramiah 6**

Alice and Jeramiah live with their mother and father in a house on Aboriginal Homelands approximately five kilometres from the township. The walls of the home are filled with framed photographs of family members. Both children regularly attend child care and school respectively. The initial literacy survey was completed by the father. The family speaks Aboriginal English and English. Dad said he reads for enjoyment about once or twice a week and there are about 50 children's books in the house. The parents had called the childcare centre when they heard about the study, as they wanted to be involved. Mum said she had never been read to as a child but wanted the children to be exposed to children's books. She bought books for the children from a discount store in the next major town about 500 kilometres away, which meant limited exposure to good-quality children's literature.

When the collection of books was handed out, Alice quickly began to open the books, turning the pages and talking to her brother. Alice’s father works long hours and participated in the book reading after eating his evening meal, so most of the reading was done by the mother and a neighbour. A neighbour who was staying in the house during the week also read to the children, took photographs and knew some of the action songs.
from one of the books. Jeramiah also read to his younger sister. He read all the books except the local photographic books and said his favourite book was *Kisses for Daddy*.

The family took 36 photographs. They show the books being read in bed, at the kitchen table, in the lounge room and outside on the verandah. Two children were sitting on the trampoline reading during the final home visit. No pattern for when and how the books were read was identified; however, a lot of time was spent reading, according to the tally of books read. The tally was 134 book-readings in the two weeks of data collection, which is nearly 10 books a day. The photographs also showed bedtime reading, with a mother reading to several children before they went to sleep, as well as many other different reading times. When a relative visited, she requested that her daughter be involved in the study. While this was not possible, she was able to borrow some of the books and also brought her daughter to the house to read the books.

### Nancy 4

Nancy lives with her mother and father on Aboriginal Homelands about 8 kilometres from the township and is being home-schooled by her parents. Her parents intend that Nancy will eventually go to school, but this is not a high priority. Neither parent was working at the time of the study, but both were engaged in range of activities including visiting, shopping and catching up with family.

This home contained many displays of photographs of family members. The family enjoyed a range of multimodal communication, including television, computers and music. During one visit, older children visiting the house were playing computer games, while one parent was watching a DVD and the other was using Facebook.

The family took 11 photographs. Analysis of the book checklist showed that 91 books were read over the data-collection period. The books were read in the bedroom, the lounge room and outside. The photographs show a high degree of adult–child interaction, with the adult and the children appearing engrossed in the books and unaware of the camera. In most of the photographs, the father was reading the books with several children, and the interview confirmed that Dad did most of the reading. The parents said their children, Nancy and her younger brother, directed the reading and pushed the parents to ‘read, read, read’. According to the parents, the children wanted to be read to all the time, ‘morning, noon and night’, not just at bedtime. The parents also commented that ‘these are the only books they have’.

The favourite book was *Kisses for Daddy*. The parents said they had had requests from visiting parents who wanted to get books for their family as well. They commented that a visiting nephew aged 10, who had been in some trouble at school and had poor reading skills, had been reading aloud to his cousin Nancy.

### Catherine 3

Catherine is three years old and is the sole child in a highly social and mobile extended family living in the township. Her grandmother is Aboriginal, her grandfather is Greek and her estranged father is African. The family speaks English, Aboriginal English and Greek. Catherine is enrolled at the childcare centre and attends regularly. During the week she moves between her two grandmothers’ homes and, as the youngest family member, is treasured by all in the family. The extended family believes that Catherine is very talented and active, and the books were often used to pacify and quieten her. One grandmother said, ‘We know that she will be a great athlete, a runner, as she is so fast. She will do well at school as she already knows her numbers and letters.’

The family took nine photographs and 88 books were read to Catherine by various family members and friends. Catherine usually chose the book. In this family, there is a strong orientation towards reading and learning, and the mother had initiated contact with the researchers. More than 20 children’s books were in the home. The home also had a lot of multimodal literacy, including television, DVDs and computers, and Catherine’s mother had purchased several electronic learning games and electronic books. Catherine’s favourite book was *Kisses for Daddy*, which was read five times a day, according to her grandmother and mother. An absent father made this book very poignant for Catherine.

### Key findings

This study into what books young Aboriginal children choose to read revealed that 1025 books were read in families over a short period. The overwhelmingly favourite book, *Kisses for Daddy*, is about a young bear who refuses to go to bed and the Daddy Bear assumes various characters such as a koala and a giraffe to try to get Baby Bear to give him a goodnight kiss. The story has Daddy Bear play-acting and using koala, crocodile and giraffe actions and voices. Baby Bear takes charge and claims ‘No kisses for Daddy’ until the end of the story, when he decides that the kiss will be granted. In the book, Baby Bear has agency and power, in keeping with the views of many Aboriginal families about young children’s individual rights and autonomy. This book was also a favourite in homes where the father was absent (in one case in hospital).

In addition to *Kisses for Daddy*, other popular books encouraged interaction between the reader and the child/children, such as *The very hungry caterpillar,*...
Rocket countdown and Dear Zoo, and these books were read most often. Several books had the child as being in control, as in That’s not my frog, a puzzle book where the reader/child explains (to an invisible adult) why the item could not possibly be theirs. Books with a very simple narrative (Stadler & Ward, 2005) such as labels or lists, isolated description or caption books without cause-and-effect, or books without character goals and intentions were not requested.

The children, not the parents, usually selected the books to be read. Parents, siblings, neighbours, extended family members or whoever was in the house was asked to read to the child, often again and again. Aboriginal children are viewed by the parents as independent beings with a strong sense of agency, and this study’s findings emphasise the parental role as responder to the children’s requests. This contrasts with the mainstream view of children as dependent, with the ‘good’ parent in control, displaying ‘teacher-like’ book-reading interaction so that children can be inculcated into the right habits (Nichols, Nixon & Rowsell, 2009).

Parents, grandparents, older siblings, friends and neighbours read to the children. Although family structures were diverse, there were many extended families with grandparents, parents and children in the home as well as visiting aunties and uncles. Neighbours visited often and it was common to have a neighbour read to the child. The caregivers for several families were foster parents, and at times the children returned to their parents and then went back to the foster family. The books went with the children on their many visits to family in different towns and were read in cars, at the houses of others, outside on the verandah or trampoline, and inside the house at the table, on the floor or in the bedroom. Some families read books as a bedtime routine but this was not common. It was more common to have a small group read a book selected by the younger child; for example, an older brother reading to a younger brother, or an older step-brother reading to younger sisters and neighbours reading to a group of children.

The photographs, surveys and checklists showed that fathers were doing much of the reading. While many mothers filled out the initial survey forms, fathers or other males in the house were more likely to do the reading, reaffirming the strong role of Aboriginal men in their children’s upbringing. It may be that, in the division of domestic labour, males were to do the reading, particularly as in some families the fathers were at home during the day and the mothers were working outside the home. The favourite book, Kisses for Daddy, involved the fathers in the reading, and the design of the book encouraged the fathers to interact with children as they read. In many studies into family literacy practices, fathers’ involvement has been invisible. Morgan, Nutbrown and Hannon (2009) wrote that fathers are often involved in family literacy practices with their children but are less likely to be visible participants in family literacy programs. They suggest that fathers’ contributions to their children’s literacy development may be underestimated.

Analysis of the parent reading survey showed the parameters governing the availability of reading material for young Aboriginal children. The data revealed that some homes had fewer than 10 books and others had up to 20 books. There are few places in the community where books for children under six years of age can be purchased. The community library in the local area school is usually fully occupied with school activities and the Aboriginal parents in this study chose not to use the library.

In recognition of the importance of print for early reading, this study focused on book reading. However, the study also demonstrated the multimodal communications in children’s homes. In all the homes in this study, the children watched DVDs, played computer games and used, or watched other family members using sophisticated phone and music applications. It appears that the multimodal devices are working in parallel with books and many parents commented that the children liked to read books related to the televised shows available by satellite.

**Conclusion**

This study into the reading choices of young Aboriginal children revealed that children choose books that promote social interaction with family members and wider social networks of friends and neighbours. The books were selected by the children and had a theme of child agency and problem solving. The favourite books involved goals and intentions in a cause-and-effect narrative structure rather than books with lists and captions. Fathers were actively involved in their children’s literacy development and read to multi-age groups of children in the home. This study demonstrated that high-quality children’s literature appeals to children and generates numerous re-readings. It also revealed that many families had few children’s books in the home and that access to children’s books was limited. The collaborative, reciprocal research methodology involved family members in data collection, and this approach promoted extensive book-sharing.
Appendix 1

My favourite book checklist
Please complete this form each time your child engages with any of the books we have left with you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book No.</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Tick each time read</th>
<th>Who selected book?</th>
<th>Child’s interest level in book (1=low interest and 5=high interest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Possum and wattle: My big book of Australian words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alison Lester’s ABC: starring Alice and Aldo</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Five little monkeys: Over 50 action and counting rhymes</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rocket countdown</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dingo Dan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tractors</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kisses for Daddy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Parsley Rabbit’s book about books</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The night Marcus won the flag</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Animals: An Indigenous first discovery book</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>I went walking</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Dear Zoo</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>That’s not my frog</td>
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<td>These are my hands</td>
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<td>Aussie two’s like to ...</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>The very hungry caterpillar</td>
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<td>Where is the green sheep?</td>
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<td>That’s not my truck</td>
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<td>An Australian 1 2 3 of animals</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Yoyo’s day</td>
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</table>

Additional books from the community

References


**My Favourite Book Collection**


**Bancroft, B. (2009). An Australian 1,2,3 of animals.** Surry Hills, NSW: Little Hare Books.


**Fox, M., & Horacek, J. (2004). Where is the green sheep?** Orlando: Harcourt.


**Williams, J., & Williams, M. (2004). The night that Marcus won the flag.** Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press.

Additional locally produced books included: *Kids picking quandongs, Making artefacts, Friends care and share, At Minya Bunhii, Little nest babies.*

**Acknowledgements**

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Introduction

The early years of life have long been hypothesised as an important life stage that affects functioning in adulthood. However, it is only in recent times that research has been able to provide evidence of the mechanisms that explain the connection between a child’s early experience and their lifetime achievement and wellbeing. An accumulation of evidence from studies using a diversity of research designs, including animal studies (for example, Kaffman & Meaney, 2007; Meaney, 2001), longitudinal studies (for example, Kovan, Chung & Sroufe, 2009; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005), experimental interventions (for example, Belfield, Nores, Barnett & Schweinhart, 2006; Muennig, Schweinhart, Montie & Neidell, 2009; Olds et al., 2004) and natural experiments (for example, Rutter et al., 2007) alongside sophisticated neuro-imaging and statistical techniques, has shown that experiences in the period from conception to five years are foundational for brain development and, as a consequence, direct life trajectories. The amount and quality of early experiences have been shown by neuroscience studies to shape neural pathways (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Perry, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) while experiments and longitudinal statistical modelling provide evidence of causal pathways from early experiences to lifelong learning outcomes and social-emotional functioning (for example, Belfield et al., 2006; Muennig et al., 2009; Olds et al., 2004; Reynolds, Suh-Ruu, & Topitzes, 2004). Poorer early experiences have been shown to reduce a child’s life possibilities, while rich and responsive early environments increase them (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This evidence has led to the emergence of preventative science, the study of early intervention to optimise children’s life chances through provision of positive early experience, and has also directed focus to educational and care policy and practices in the years from birth to school entry.

The recent Council of Australian Governments (COAG) communiqué on child care (2009a) and publication of the National quality standard for early childhood education and care and school age care (2009b) are direct responses to this evidence (see Senate Standing Committee on Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Over the past two years, policy conceptualisation of the role of child care in Australia has shifted from one that focused heavily on the function of enabling parental participation in the workforce to one that adopts the vision of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2006
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report, *Starting Strong II*. This vision recognises quality early education and care as a right of the child and provision of high-quality early education experiences as a prudent investment that benefits the individual, society and the economy. Commensurately the shift of attention has been directed away from cost minimisation to focus on raising the quality of provision in child care (Ishimine, Tayler, & Thorpe, 2009; Thorpe, Cloney, & Tayler, in press). The recommendations of the COAG communiqué are that quality of childcare environments, particularly the relational environment, should be increased by improving child to staff ratios and increasing the qualification levels of the childcare workforce. The childcare workforce is, therefore, a centrepiece.

One important component of this strategy is increasing the number of qualified teachers who work within the childcare sector. Though the relationship is by no means simple or direct (see Early et al., 2007) there is evidence that the presence of qualified teachers in childcare settings is associated with higher levels of global quality, more responsive interactions and improved child outcomes (Barnett, 2003; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). However, there may be barriers to entry of degree-qualified staff to child care. This is the focus of the current paper that questions Bachelor of Education degree students specialising in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed (EC)) about their experiences of child care, attitudes to child care and intentions to work in the childcare sector. The B.Ed (EC) qualifies teachers for work in early education settings across the age range birth to eight years. This includes childcare settings for children from birth to five years, specialist early education (preschool/kindergarten) for three- to five-year olds and the first years of formal schooling from five to eight years. This study asks whether B.Ed (EC) pre-service teachers are willing to work in the childcare sector and examines the barriers and incentives for so doing.

There is currently a dearth of research evidence on pre-service and graduate early childhood teachers’ attitudes and intentions to work in the childcare sector. While there is significant academic and popular literature on the effects of non-parental care on the child and emerging literature documenting parents’ views about using child care (for example, Harris, 2008), an extensive literature search found only one peer-reviewed published paper (Hill & Veale, 1997) and two conference presentations (Field & Varga, 1997; Vajda, 2005) on this subject. Field and Varga (1997) and Hill and Veale (1997) consider attitudes to maternal work and use of child care, the former in a Canadian sample and the latter in an Australian sample. Both studies report that students held negative attitudes about maternal work and child care and concluded that such attitudes ran contrary to positive engagement in early childhood education and care settings. The value of these studies is in indicating the potential role of personal value systems; however, the context of maternal employment has changed rapidly across the 13 years since these papers were written. Vajda (2005) presents a more recent study of eight pre-service teachers’ views of doing practicum in a childcare centre. In this study the students saw maternal employment as a necessity but viewed child care negatively and were reluctant to participate in practicum. The study reported that students’ views became more positive after they had experienced practicum and witnessed the value of the experience for children’s learning. Though small, this study provides important insight into the mismatch between held views and reality of the childcare experience and directs attention to both the importance of value systems and direct experiences.

In the current study, value systems and experience in child care were incorporated into the modelling and design.

In the absence of a strong extant literature, our research team developed a theoretical model of factors associated with intention to work in child care. This directed the study design and content of the questions asked of participants. In keeping with prior studies (Field & Varga, 1997; Hill & Veale, 1997; Vajda, 2005) our model, presented in Figure 1, commenced with the hypothesis that personal and professional experience of child care, along with professional education, would affect the valuing of child care as a professional option. A comprehensive set of variables capturing personal and professional experience were included. The model then introduced factors, both personal and structural, that might moderate this association. To measure belief systems about childcare provision, a self-report, attitudinal scale was developed that asked about views of the child and the value of child care. Our study was exploratory and addressed four key questions:

1. Who is studying for a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and what are their motives?
2. What are the students’ value systems relating to maternal employment, gender roles, childcare provision and usage of pre-service early childhood teachers?
3. What structural factors are the most salient in preventing or encouraging willingness to consider participation in the childcare workforce?
4. What proportions of pre-service teachers intend, or would consider, working in the childcare sector and what distinguishes them from those who would not consider this option?
Participants
The participants were 55 Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) students in their third year of study of a four-year degree at an Australian university. These represented 80% of the total year cohort ($n=69$) of B.Ed (EC) students. As part of this course students undertook a unit of teaching and practicum in child care (Early Childhood Field Studies 3), alongside a unit in Research Methods in Early Childhood. All students were recruited when they attended the first lecture of the Research Methods unit. Non-participants were those who did not attend the first lecture ($n=10$, 15%) and those who chose not to complete the questionnaire and returned it blank ($n=4$, 5%). The cohort was almost totally female (96%, $n=53$), had a mean age of 21.1 years (range 19–36 years, SD 3.2 years) and most ($n=48$, 84.1%) had entered the degree from school. Of the cohort, two (2.95%) held a previous degree, nine (13.1%) had a Technical and Further Education qualification in child care and four (5.8%) of the students were parents.

Measure development
A pilot study was conducted in the year prior to that on which we currently report. This study was exploratory and employed open-ended questions which were distributed to a cohort of 76 first-year B.Ed (EC) students. The open-ended responses guided our questionnaire development for close-ended response questions and has previously been reported (Ailwood & Boyd, 2007).

Questionnaire
The questionnaire was developed to measure the key components of the model of intentions to work in child care. Each section contained numerically coded questions to allow quantitative analyses, but also provided open-ended response sections to allow qualitative accounts. There were four key sections that mapped onto the model:

1. Personal and professional experience. The items obtained information on age, gender, number of children, use of child care for own children, qualifications, experience working in the childcare sector and other forms of work with children, membership of professional organisations, childhood experience of non-parental care, and reason for undertaking B.Ed (EC).

2. Personal value and belief systems. We measured five dimensions of values and beliefs:
a. Gender roles attitudes scale. This was an 8-item scale assessing the beliefs about the role of men and women in paid employment, child care and household tasks.

b. Cost of maternal employment (BCME—cost). This was a modification of the original BACME costs sub-scale (Greenberger, Goldberg, Crawford, & Granger, 1988). It included 14 items which were statements (for example, children learn more if their mothers stay at home with them) rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree through to strongly disagree).

c. Benefits of maternal employment (BCME—benefit). This was a modification of the original BACME benefits sub-scale (Greenberger et al., 1988). It included 14 items which were statements (for example, children whose mothers work are more adaptable) rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree through to strongly disagree).

d. Childcare attitudes. This 7-item scale assessed beliefs about the purpose and value of childcare for children and families (for example, long day care supports children and families). These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree through to strongly disagree).

e. Judgement of family use of child care. This was an 8-item scale asking respondents to judge on a 3-point scale (preferable, acceptable, and not acceptable) the acceptability of different family types using long day care. Family types included: depressed mother, single parent, low-income dual worker, average-income dual worker, high-income dual worker, non-working mother, non-working father and families wanting to promote their children’s development.

3. Structural barriers and incentives for employment in child care. This was an 8-item scale that asked respondents to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (strong barrier through to strong incentive) how a range of structural features affected their willingness to work in child care. The items included level of pay, work conditions (flexibility, holiday tasks), work opportunities, leadership, and status (social status, ‘not education’).

4. Intention to work in child care. A 4-point Likert scale (definitely will not work in childcare, prefer not, possibly, preferred place of employment) was used to assess willingness to work in child care.

Procedure
All students were recruited during attendance at the first lecture of the Research Methods unit. They were informed that the study was a longitudinal examination of their views about child care and that there would be data collection points before and after a scheduled childcare practicum in the penultimate lecture of the semester. To enable anonymous participation, students were asked to generate a six symbol unique identification code comprised of the first three letters of their mother’s maiden name and the last three numbers of their mobile phone (or if no mobile, their home phone). Questionnaires were completed and returned within the lecture. The same procedure and identifier was used at the second data collection which was conducted after the experiences of a childcare practicum in the penultimate lecture of the semester. This allowed linkage of data across the two time points.

Analyses
In analyses addressing research questions 1, 2 and 3, numeric data were entered into the SPSS statistical package to generate descriptive statistics and corresponding open-ended responses were read and emergent categories of response identified. In the reporting of qualitative data, examples of each category are presented in text. In addressing research question 4, frequencies of response to the outcome variable were obtained and subsequently two categories of student derived: those willing (preferred option, willing to consider) and those less willing (would not consider and prefer not to work in child care). Statistical analyses explored associations between these two categories and the demographic, structural and value measures. Qualitative data for those willing and less willing to work in child care was examined and distinguishing characteristics identified. Text is presented to illustrate these differences in presentation of results.

Results

Question 1: Who is studying for a B.Ed (EC) and what are their motives?

Summary statistics describing the cohort of students are presented in Table 1. This data indicates that those studying for a B.Ed with an early childhood speciality were a highly homogenous group who were female (97%), had entered their degree from school (84.1%) and had not experienced non-parental care as children (83.6%). Only a small minority held a previous degree (2.95%) or had a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualification in child care (13.1%) or were parents (5.8%). All (100%) enjoyed being with children, most had some formal experience of work with children (86%) and intended to be, or were already, parents (97%). The majority viewed their degree as leading to work in the Preparatory–Year 3 sector of education (85.%) rather than child care (11.1%); saw that a degree in Early Childhood Education suited their skills
Qualitative data were derived from an open-ended question ‘Please comment on any reasons for choosing early childhood education’. Of the total cohort, 35 students (64%) provided comment. Data was examined and coding categories derived. There were six categories: two relate to emotional and intellectual interest (passionate about children and children’s rights, intellectual interest in child development and early education); two to personal needs (convenience for life plans, suits personal qualities) and two to comparison with alternative options (failed to get into preferred option, older children harder to teach). Some students provided multiple reasons and two provided responses that could not be coded. Figure 2 presents summary results. These indicate that concern for the rights of children, intellectual interest in education and child development, and personal qualities (for example creativity) were the key motives for choosing the degree:

I find that children are amazing in their theories, thoughts and provocations. I chose early childhood because I wanted to learn more about children and provide the best possible education for them (Student 3).

I feel that as a teacher I could impact positively on the lives and learning of young children. I also believe that children’s learning and capabilities are of importance to me and wish to enhance these through teaching (Student 37).

I am a very creative person—teaching in the early years allows me to extend and utilise this skill (Student 48).

Figure 2: Motivation for undertaking B.Ed (Early Childhood)

In addition, a small number of students perceived a career in early childhood education as convenient, as easier than other areas of education or as a fallback to a preferred career option for which they had not qualified:

I really look forward to having my own family and being able to fit work in with family (Student 23).

Because children get worse as they get older (Student 34).

I didn’t get into my first choice … so did Anthropology and didn’t see it going anywhere. Mum suggested doing teaching and it seemed like a good idea (Student 21).

**Question 2: What are the value systems of pre-service early childhood teachers?**

Summary statistics of the attitudinal measures are provided in Table 2. Across the sample the distribution
of gender attitude scores indicated that students held non-traditional, gender-role attitudes. On the gender attitudes measure a score range from 0–32 was possible. All participants scored in the higher range of the score distribution (range 19–32, mean 25.87, SD 2.98). This indicates that the students held beliefs that men and women had equal rights and role in workforce participation, household tasks and care of the child.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for attitudinal measures

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender attitude (0–32)</td>
<td>19–32</td>
<td>25.87</td>
<td>2.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCME – Cost (0–56)</td>
<td>2–31</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCME – Benefits (0–56)</td>
<td>6–39</td>
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<td>7.7</td>
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<td>Family judgement (0–56)</td>
<td>0–27</td>
<td>14.78</td>
<td>7.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childcare attitude (0–28)</td>
<td>15–26</td>
<td>20.63</td>
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Scores on the BCME indicated views about the costs and benefits of maternal employment on children’s development and wellbeing. For both costs and benefits the potential scores were 0–56, with higher scores indicating higher levels of cost and benefit respectively. The scores for a cost of maternal employment to the child were in the lower end of this potential distribution (range 2–31, mean = 14.02, SD 5.8), suggesting that the group did not view the costs of maternal employment to children to be high. The variability within the group was low, suggesting this view was common across the group. In contrast, the sample was more divided about the benefits of maternal employment to the child with a wider distribution of scores (range 6–39) and a mean of 24.7 (SD 7.7).

Scores on the family judgement scale allowed potential scores from 0 (all families have right to use child care without judgement) to 56 (use of child care is unacceptable for any family). The scores were in the lower end of the distribution (range 0–27, mean = 14.78, SD 7.6) suggesting that most participants believed that parents from diverse family circumstance had a right to access child care.

Scores on attitudes to child care ranged from 0 to 28, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes to the educational and social support function of child care. Among the cohort the range of scores was high (15–26) but the mean (20.63, SD 2.3), near the top of the distribution, suggested that most held positive views of child care.

Qualitative accounts were obtained in response to the question ‘Please comment on your views about parents’ use of long day care for birth to three-year-olds’. Responses were provided by 48 (87%) of students at Time 1 and 40 (58%) at Time 2. These are summarised in Figure 3. The highest frequency of comments provided unqualified support for family usage of long day care, as the following two comments indicate:

Everyone should have access to child care and I make no judgements about families who use child care (Student 1).

Day-care is necessary for many families to lead balanced lives and children can benefit greatly from quality care (Student 6).

Figure 3: Views about parent’s usage of long day-care for 0–3-year-olds at Time 1 and Time 2

Many students felt that usage of long day care should be for restricted hours and some indicated it was not appropriate for children in the first year of life:

I have mixed beliefs and views on child care for birth to three-year olds. I believe it is important for children to have opportunity for social interaction however I think birth to one-and-a-half years is a little young to be there five days a week. Part-time child care, I believe, provides rich experiences (Student 13).

Many also indicated that long day care was only acceptable for usage of particular family types, such as single parents or families of working parents:

I think there should be limitations e.g. a single parent may use long day care five days per week whereas a non-working parent should limit to one full day or two half-days (Student 30).

Most parents I know of who use long day care are single parents or both working. I see child care as a waste of money if parents or relatives are able to take care of the child (Student 39).

Some acknowledged the potential benefit to children and children’s right of access, and included comments about the need for high-quality provision:

It should not be about the parent but about the child and their right to education regardless of what their family circumstances are (Student 32).
Question 3: What structural factors are the most salient in preventing or encouraging willingness to consider participation in the childcare workforce?

Responses to the structural barriers and incentives of working in child care are presented in Figure 4. These suggest that the barriers are overwhelmingly structural factors: pay, work hours and poor status of the work. Figures 5 and 6 present coded qualitative responses to the question ‘Please comment on the factors that are barriers or incentives to you working in child care’. These responses elaborated on the saliency of pay conditions and status as structural barriers:

I want to be paid according to my degree level. Money is a huge factor in today’s society (Student 1).

The views society has on child care affect the levels of pay and working conditions ... if child care was viewed as an educational setting (because it is one!) then I would have no hesitation working in child care (Student 11).

Incentives for working in long day care are the flexibility and enjoyment of working with young children. However pay is a major barrier (Student 9).

The status and hours are really inflexible. The changing shifts and the pay do not correlate (Student 48).

Some students also indicated that they would not be among a ‘community of teachers’ or that work in long day care did not accord with their interests:

I would possibly work in child care if I could choose who I worked with (other education professionals) and had the choice of pedagogical decisions—then it would compel me to work there (Student 23).

As I really want to work in interventions and with children who have disability my interest is not in child care (Student 4).

Figure 4: Salience of structural factors as barriers and incentives to work in child care

Figure 5: Barriers to working in child care: Qualitative account

Two key themes emerged as incentives for working in child care: commitment (to the rights of the child and to early education) and personal opportunity (for leadership and creativity). These two broad themes were often combined. It was interesting to note that the number of responses relating to creativity and leadership increased at Time 2 when the students had experienced a practicum in a long day care setting:

After prac I feel I want to work in child care because I feel I can make a difference and provide children with richer experiences (Student 4).

I loved it (working in child care)—listening to children’s thinking and planning from this. I enjoyed incorporating the arts—it was) fun and engaging (Student 40).

I like the fact that you have control over how you run your room. Schools are not so open-ended (Student 41).

Question 4: What proportion of pre-service teachers would work, or consider working, in the childcare sector and what distinguishes them from those less willing?
Figure 7 presents the responses to the question ‘Would you consider working in centre-based long day care?’ The results indicate that, at Time 1, while 16.7% would not consider this option and 35.2% would prefer alternative employment, just under half of the sample (48.9%) would consider working in child care. When asked Time 2, after practicum, there was a small but positive shift toward increased consideration of a childcare career option.

Figure 7: Response to question: Would you consider working in centre-based long day care?

Statistical analyses aimed to examine associations between the range of demographic, structural and attitudinal variables and the outcome variable, willingness to work in child care. Because there was so little demographic variability in the sample such associations could not be explored. There was also only limited variability in attitudinal variables (gender roles, attitudes to child care, family judgement). The association of these scores with a dichotomous variable, willingness to work in child care, were examined using independent t-test analyses in which groups were those less willing (definitely no and probably no) and those more willing (definitely yes and possibly) to consider child care. No significant differences were found on any of these analyses, probably reflecting small sample size and limited range of variability on attitudinal scores. Examination of structural factors similarly was limited by the small numbers and the largely homogenous response to many features of work in child care (pay and conditions) and did not yield statistically significant differences between those more and less willing to consider child care.

Qualitative data was analysed to identify any differences in text accounts that distinguished those willing and less willing to consider child care. A key feature to emerge from the comments of those willing to consider child care was the association with altruism: the placement of social advocacy and the needs of others above those of personal need. That is, those more willing to consider child care were no less concerned about the pay conditions and status of child care than those who would not consider child care but were more motivated to overcome these barriers and forgo personal gain. This was expressed both as professional commitment to leadership and desire to advocate for social change:

I’m starting to feel compelled to work in child care as I think the field needs as many early childhood professionals and I could advocate for the field (Student 41).

Prior to starting my degree I worked in a long day care centre. I didn’t realise how far off the mark we were until now. Eventually I would like to run my own GOOD-QUALITY centre. I think from working in the centre and seeing how I wouldn’t like to run things and the skills and knowledge I have and am still gaining from this course, I could run a fantastic centre (Student 51).

Those less willing were no less aware of the social value of child care but recognised that they did not have the personal or financial resources to consider this form of work with its attendant structural barriers:

I understand that it will take early childhood education-trained teachers to change child care but I am not enthusiastic about changing it enough to make a difference ... (Student 47).

It’s all about money. You go to uni for four years, come out with a $16,000 debt to go to work for $29,000 a year. I can earn more pulling beers at my local pub. I loved prac and could really see myself in child care but then reality hits (Student 42).

Discussion

Australia has recently witnessed change in the conceptualisation of the function of childcare provision, from one focused primarily on enabling parental participation in the workforce to one that also focuses on providing quality educational opportunities for all children. This shift has directed policy attention away from cost minimisation to an agenda of quality improvement (COAG, 2009b). The development of an Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government, 2009), the purchase of 685 ABC Developmental Learning Centres by a not-for-profit consortium and the recent COAG undertaking to reduce staff ratios and improve the quality of provision in centres are all manifestations of this change. Central to the quality improvement agenda is the provision of a more highly trained childcare workforce. The current study aimed to assess the willingness of those training as degree level early childhood education specialists to work in the childcare sector.

Our study commenced by examining the demographic characteristics and beliefs of those undertaking a
degree in early childhood education. We examined the characteristics of a cohort of students in the third year of their degree because this was the year in which they undertook coursework focused specifically on child care, including a practicum in a childcare setting. Our data suggest that the cohort were a highly homogenous group who were almost entirely female and entering the degree from school completion. While the homogeneity of the cohort may raise concern and suggest the need to attract a more diverse population into early childhood education, our findings do not suggest that the population characteristics of our cohort were associated with negative belief systems about maternal work, negative judgements of child care, or unwillingness to consider entering the childcare workforce. The cohort held uniformly high non-traditional gender role attitudes and were largely positive about the role child care can play in the wellbeing of children and families. The scores on the Benefits and Costs of Maternal Employment (BCME) scale indicated that few judged the costs of maternal employment to be negative for the child. It is interesting to note that these findings contrast both with prior studies (Field & Varga, 1997; Hill & Veale, 1997) and with qualitative data from our pilot study (Ailwood & Boyd, 2007), in which first year students expressed more negative views. It is possible that changing socioeconomic contexts across the 13 years since two of these studies accounts for the contrast in student views. However this explanation is unlikely to hold for two cohorts within the same university conducted a year apart. The differences in our first- and third-year student cohorts are most likely the effects of student learning across the two years of study. Within the third year cohort there was some variability in scores on measures of the benefits of maternal employment for the child and qualified responses in accounts given of appropriate usage of child care. Their responses align with research literature that suggests that long hours of day care from early in life may be detrimental to the child (see Belsky, 2001). The conflict between the rights of children to obtain early education within a childcare setting and the concerns about variability of quality in the Australian context were evident in both quantitative data and qualitative accounts.

Although very few of the students expressed a preference for working in the childcare sector, approximately half of the cohort was willing to consider this option. The barriers to entering the childcare workforce almost entirely related to the pay and conditions of work. A few also identified absence of a community of like professionals and low status as important. These results are not surprising but are nevertheless key issues for policy-makers and professional organisations to consider, if highly qualified professionals are to be attracted to the field. Perhaps more interesting in our results are the reports of incentives for working in child care. Work in the prior-to-school sector was seen as less restrictive and affording opportunity for creativity and innovation. The students who were willing to consider working in child care also saw the importance of the early years of life and the opportunity to lead and make a difference for children, families and society. These beliefs were evident among responses prior to the students’ experience of practicum in child care, but increased in number following this experience. The students in the study cohort were taught, on campus, by highly experienced childcare leaders. Their input may account for increased understanding of the potential of quality child care to support children’s learning and explain differences between our data and that at entry to first year (Ailwood and Boyd, 2007). Alongside this, those who had a positive practical experience of child care during their practicum placement were more likely to consider entering the childcare workforce. This finding accords with the previous report of Vajdaa (2005). There is indication in our data that, in preparing degree-level early childhood specialists, a positive practicum experience and exposure to explicit teaching and professional leadership in child care are influential. Such strategies warrant further specific study and documentation.

Our study presents the first account of the views of a cohort of students preparing to enter the early childhood workforce. We have examined the barriers and incentives to participate in the childcare sector within this single year cohort. Our study was limited by the relatively small sample size and cross-sectional design. There is a need to increase the body of evidence with larger sample sizes, perhaps sampled from a range of training institutions. Longitudinal tracking of students as they progress through their course and the influence of direct teaching, exposure to leadership models and practicum, needs explicit study. The cohort on whom this study reports were captured at a time of great change in early childhood education and care in Australia. At the commencement of their degree the students participating in this study were in a context, particularly in the State of Queensland, in which a single, profit-driven, corporate childcare provider monopolised the childcare sector. As they leave to enter the workforce the early childhood education and care landscape is changing. The significance of the experiences of birth to three-year-olds, supported by strong evidence from developmental science, is now receiving the acknowledgement for which early childhood professionals have long argued. That half the pre-service early childhood teachers would consider work in the childcare sector is a positive starting point. The challenge is to make it a preferred career option among graduating degree-level early education specialists.

References


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Introduction

In Australia and many other western industrialised countries, governments adopt a marketised approach to the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (OECD, 2006). Implicit in such an approach is the assumption that parents have the capacity to discern centre quality. Undermining this premise, however, is a body of research that generally positions parents as having limited knowledge to make informed judgements about a centre’s provision of quality. Findings pertaining to long day care (LDC), the most utilised type of formal child care in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), suggest first, that parents generally have limited knowledge about what constitutes childcare quality (Leach et al., 2008; Li-Grining & Coley, 2006; Shpancer et al., 2002; Turner & Smith, 1983; Van Horn, Ramey, Mulvihill & Newell, 2001). As uninformed consumers, these parents may evaluate centres of mediocre quality as high quality (Shpancer et al., 2002). Second, while some parents may be informed about what childcare professionals deem to be important for the provision of quality ECEC, this knowledge does not necessarily translate into a capacity to discern centre quality. Indeed, considerable evidence suggests that informed parents may also overestimate the quality provided at the centre their child attends (Browne, 1984; Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Cryer, Tietze & Wessels, 2002; Knoche, Peterson, Edwards & Jeon, 2006; Shpancer et al., 2002).

Parents’ capacity to discern centre quality is important for a number of reasons. In Australia, the number of children from birth to six years of age utilising centre-based LDC has steadily increased since 1996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). As at September 2009, over half a million children attended LDC for an average of 26 hours per week (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). Given the direct relationship between childcare quality and developmental outcomes for children (Love et al., 2003; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004), parent overestimations of quality may mean that children receive less than optimal education and care, with significant implications for their future development.

In Australia, the Federal Government recently abolished parent surveys as a component of the National Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005), which rates centres’ provision of quality. Prior to this change, centres have been required to complete a self-study that draws on evaluations from parents, staff and management. This self-study is then followed up by an external validation assessment, with both sets of

Parent users of high-quality long day care: Informed consumers of child care?

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INHERENT IN THE AUSTRALIAN Government’s marketised provision of early childhood education is the assumption that parents are informed consumers of child care who can discern centre quality. Drawing on Sumision and Goodfellow’s (2009) typology of parents as consumers, we explore this assumption through questionnaire findings from a sample of 139 parents whose children were enrolled in high-quality long day care. Findings indicate that parents had considerable knowledge of process aspects of quality, but less understanding of staff attributes, structural elements (particularly ratios and qualifications) and intangible contributors to quality, such as leadership. Parents’ responses varied according to demographic profile and centre practices. Findings suggest scope for educators to enhance parents’ capacity to drive demand-led quality improvements, and a need for future research to explore parents’ values-based as well as knowledge-based understandings of quality in child care.
evaluations then subject to a moderation process that determines a centre’s provision of quality on a four-point scale: 1 = Unsatisfactory, 2 = Satisfactory, 3 = Good quality, and 4 = High quality. According to the National Childcare Accreditation Council, the decision to disband parent surveys was made, in part, because parents tended to overestimate centre quality, thus rendering the surveys to be of limited value (Horin, 2009).

To ‘improve public knowledge about and access to information about the quality of ECEC … and to help inform their choices about the quality of education and care provided to their children’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 7) the Australian Government is developing a Quality Rating System, to be introduced in January 2012 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Under this system a to-be-established Quality Authority will assess ECEC services against National Quality Standards currently under development, with each service to be rated as either unsatisfactory, operating, national quality standard, high quality, or excellent. These ratings will be made publicly available, with the intention that parents will be able to make more informed decisions about the setting in which they choose to enrol their child.

A premise of this policy initiative is to build parents’ capacity to discern centre quality through an engendering of parental trust in ‘the system’. In other words, parents will be able to ‘know’ the level of quality of the centre their child is attending, or may attend, by referring to the centre’s quality rating. This approach, however, is potentially problematic for a number of reasons. First, it creates parental dependence on the rating system and does not directly build parents’ understandings about what research purports are key elements that support high quality. Second, the approach appears to assume that the information asymmetry on which regulatory measures such as the Quality Rating System are based can only be addressed by government in this indirect way; strategies that seek to directly build parents’ knowledge about quality ECEC and could complement the Rating System have not been introduced. Third, the approach assumes that what parents value as quality is encapsulated in the standards on which centre ratings will be based. Because ‘quality’ is a relative construct (Moss & Pence, 1994), parents’ conceptualisation of quality can overlap with, but may also be distinct from, that of policymakers (Harrist, Thompson & Norris, 2007; Mooney & Munton, 1998). Research by Shlay and colleagues (2005) in the United States suggests that parents will rate centres that are licensed and accredited as more desirable, and deem them as being worth more in terms of fees, than centres that are not. However, such trust in the system will be warranted only if regulatory systems such as the new Rating System are robust in their standards, comprehensive in their evaluative processes, and in alignment with parents’ values and beliefs about their child’s wellbeing and development.

In this paper we are interested in teasing out some of the premises and assumptions on which developing Australian Government policy is based, within a conceptual frame of parents as ECEC consumers. Our thinking is informed by a three-dimensional matrix proposed by Sumson and Goodfellow (2009) for considering the possibilities of parents bringing about demand-led improvements to quality. Of the three axes of their matrix—parent knowledge/perceptiveness, parent motivation/focus, and parent agency/power—we are primarily concerned with parent knowledge/perceptiveness. Sumson and Goodfellow use this term to convey parents’ familiarity with aspects of quality referred to in the literature and what these aspects look like in practice. They acknowledge the potential of mechanisms such as the Rating System to reconfigure relationships between government, and service providers and parents in ways conducive to demand-led improvements to quality, while also recognising that mechanisms such as these may induce unwarranted confidence, and thus reduce the likelihood of demand-led improvements.

This paper explores parents’ perspectives on quality in LDC in Australia, in ways that do not conform how they might conceptualise quality in child care. Such exploration is important for a number of reasons. First, most research that has investigated parents’ understandings has used closed methods that confined parent responses to options available in the measures used (Fenech, in press). This approach, however, overlooks the possibility that what parents may value as quality may not be recognised in widely used measures of quality, or be consistent with the views of experts and professionals.

Second, not all research investigating parents’ perceptions note the level of quality of the centres parent participants were using. Of the studies that did, most were conducted at centres whose quality was assessed as mediocre (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Cryer et al., 2002; Knoche et al., 2006; Leach et al., 2008). Importantly, Australian LDC is generally of a higher quality than has been reported in the United States and the United Kingdom (Elicker, Clavson, Hong & Evangelou, 2006; Harrison, Skouteris, Watson & Ungerer, 2006; Sylva et al., 2006), where the majority of work investigating parents as consumers has been conducted. These contextual differences prompt the question of whether exposure to high-quality LDC might enhance parents’ understandings of quality in ways that align with elements experts have identified as supporting high quality.

Third, to date, Australian empirical research investigating parents as consumers of ECEC has been limited. Of seven available studies published in peer-reviewed journals (da Silva & Wise, 2006; Elliott, 2003;
Hand, 2005; Harris, 2008; Rodd & Milikan, 1994; Rolfe & Richards, 1993; Williams & Ainley, 1994) parents were asked to evaluate centre quality, or aspects of centre quality, in only two (da Silva & Wise, 2006; Rolfe & Richards, 1993). Unlike da Silva and Wise, Rolfe and Richards included comparative external quality ratings for the three centres in their study. Here, only one of 10 mothers gave an evaluation that was not consistent with independent quality assessments. All seven mothers whose children attended high-quality centres gave positive evaluations but, importantly, for different reasons. Furthermore, only three of the seven studies (da Silva & Wise, 2006; Harris, 2008; Williams & Ainley, 1994) explicitly sought parents’ views about what they considered important to the provision of quality ECEC. Parents in the studies that used closed, quantitative measures (da Silva & Wise, 2006; Williams & Ainley, 1994) consistently rated health and safety, staff–child interactions, and staff qualifications and training as very important. Harris’s (2008) qualitative exploration of what mothers in a regional area looked for in a LDC centre yielded similar findings. Notably, however, these mothers also highlighted elements not generally included in quantitative measures: not-for-profit status and links to the local community. These findings highlight the need for further research that explores parent perspectives in the Australian context so as to inform developing Australian Government policy.

The focus of this paper is whether parents who attend an externally defined high-quality centre are informed consumers of quality ECEC. Do they identify elements purported in the research literature to support quality? Do their understandings of centre quality vary across their respective centres and/or according to demographic differences? To explore these questions, the paper progresses as follows. First, we briefly outline the elements identified by research as contributors to quality LDC. We then report questionnaire findings of parents’ perspectives of centre quality from six case study LDC centres rated as high quality in two external measures: the ECERS-R/ITERS observation ratings scales (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003) and Australia’s national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005). These measures were used to determine the level of quality provided in a sample of 74 LDC centres. This sample was drawn from the longitudinal Child Care Choices study (Bowes, Harrison, Sweller, Taylor, & Neilsen-Hewitt, 2009) that investigated the impact of multiple-care arrangements on children’s development. With University ethics approval, all 1 16 LDC centres in the Child Care Choices study were invited to participate in the Investigating Quality study. Seventy-three centres (62.9%) agreed to participate. Phase One of this study involved ascertaining the level of quality provided by these centres, as per the observation and accreditation instruments. Phase two involved identifying six centres deemed by both measures to be providing consistent high quality, and inviting them to participate as a case study centre where elements that contributed to the high-quality scores would be explored. ECERS/ITERS observations were undertaken with each centre willing to participate. Each centre’s current ECERS/ITERS scores (ranging from 1 = inadequate, 3 = minimal/adequate, 5 = good quality, and 7 = excellent), and average accreditation ratings (1 = unsatisfactory, through 2 = satisfactory, 3 = good quality, and 4 = high quality) over the period 2002–2006, are presented in Table 1. Each centre’s most recent Quality Profile certificate, issued by the NCAC, was consistent with their previous accreditation ratings.

### Method

#### Recruitment

Data presented in this paper is drawn from an Investigating Quality study that is exploring elements that support and sustain high-quality LDC in Australia (Harrison, Press, Sumsion, Bowes & Fenech, 2008). Perspectives of centre quality were sought from parents whose children were enrolled at one of six case study LDC centres rated as high quality in two external measures: the ECERS-R/ITERS observation ratings scales (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003) and Australia’s national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005). These measures were used to determine the level of quality provided in a sample of 74 LDC centres. This sample was drawn from the longitudinal Child Care Choices study (Bowes, Harrison, Sweller, Taylor, & Neilsen-Hewitt, 2009) that investigated the impact of multiple-care arrangements on children’s development. With University ethics approval, all 1 16 LDC centres in the Child Care Choices study were invited to participate in the Investigating Quality study. Seventy-three centres (62.9%) agreed to participate. Phase One of this study involved ascertaining the level of quality provided by these centres, as per the observation and accreditation instruments. Phase two involved identifying six centres deemed by both measures to be providing consistent high quality, and inviting them to participate as a case study centre where elements that contributed to the high-quality scores would be explored. ECERS/ITERS observations were undertaken with each centre willing to participate. Each centre’s current ECERS/ITERS scores (ranging from 1 = inadequate, 3 = minimal/adequate, 5 = good quality, and 7 = excellent), and average accreditation ratings (1 = unsatisfactory, through 2 = satisfactory, 3 = good quality, and 4 = high quality) over the period 2002–2006, are presented in Table 1. Each centre’s most recent Quality Profile certificate, issued by the NCAC, was consistent with their previous accreditation ratings.

#### An (un)informed perspective of quality ECEC

Following Sumsion & Goodfellow’s (2009) model, informed, discerning consumers of LDC will have a grasp of the elements experts have identified as conducive to the provision of high-quality ECEC. These elements are essentially structural and process inputs that have been shown to optimise children’s development (Huntsman, 2008; Leach et al., 2008). Identified structural elements—measurable and regulatory aspects of a centre’s environment—are low staff–child ratios, small group sizes, qualified (especially university teacher-qualified) staff, and a physical environment that is clean, safe and stimulating. Process elements—those pertaining to a child’s experiences—include staff with non-authoritarian beliefs about child rearing; the presence of stimulating, developmentally appropriate programs; warm, frequent, responsive interactions between staff and children that involve ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003); and parental communication and involvement. Cleveland and Krashinsky (2005) also point to less tangible contributors to quality, factors that contribute to centre quality in a ‘behind the scenes’ but nonetheless important way. Examples include strong leadership, adult-work factors such as job satisfaction, and not-for-profit status.
Table 1: Participating centres' current ECERS and ITERS scores, and average accreditation scores for the period 2002–2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre (location)</th>
<th>ECERS (1 to 7)</th>
<th>ITERS (1 to 7)</th>
<th>Accreditation (1 to 4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre A (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre B (urban centre)</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre C (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre D (rural centre)</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre E (rural centre)</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre F (rural centre)</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participating centres were community-based not-for-profit centres that enrolled children aged from six weeks to six years. Table 2 outlines details pertaining to each centre’s number of licensed places, number of families enrolled, number of parent respondents, and questionnaire response rate. Response rates were lower in the rural centres, which had a greater proportion of part-time families than the urban centres.

Table 2: Participating centres’ demographics and response rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre (location)</th>
<th># of licensed places</th>
<th># of enrolled families</th>
<th># of parent participants</th>
<th>Parent response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre A (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre B (urban centre)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre C (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre D (rural centre)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre E (rural centre)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre F (rural centre)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>706</strong></td>
<td><strong>139</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>19.7%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrument**

Parents at these six case study centres were invited to complete a short questionnaire that sought to explore their perceptions of centre quality. The questionnaire comprised two parts and used a mix of open and closed questions. Part A, Question One asked respondents to rate their centre's level of quality on a five point scale: 1 = poor, 2 = minimal, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = good, and 5 = high quality. Question Two asked parents to identify elements they considered supported the provision of quality at their centre. Question Three asked if there was anything about the centre that could be changed to improve the level of quality. Less than half (58, 41.7%) of all parents responded to this question. Given that this was most likely because of the high level of satisfaction with the quality of the centre, the findings and discussion sections will not focus on this question. Unlike much of the research that has investigated parents’ perceptions of centre quality through the use of closed questions (Fenech, in press), we deliberately used open questions as we did not want to confine what respondents considered important to the provision of quality. Part B contained demographic questions pertaining to respondents’ age, gender, country of birth, level of education, age of the child(ren) enrolled, and years of involvement at their respective centres.

**Participants**

Overall, 139 of a possible 706 parents (19.7%) completed a questionnaire. All participants completed Question One and 136 participants completed Question Two. Demographic information showed that parents were primarily female (129, 92.8%), aged 30–40 years (104, 74.8%), and held a university qualification (90, 64.7%). Parent qualifications ranged from high school only (19, 13.7%), through trade certificates (13, 9.4%), diploma (17, 12.2%), bachelor degree (46, 33.1%) to post-graduate (44, 31.7%). On average, parents in urban centres were significantly more likely to hold a university qualification (65, 90.3%) than were parents in rural centres (25, 37.3%). In contrast, parents in rural centres were more likely than their urban counterparts to have high school or trade qualifications (29 vs 3) or a diploma (13 vs 4). Most parents were Australian-born (108, 77.7%) but, overall, participants represented a diversity of cultural backgrounds: Asia, the Pacific Islands, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries. Notably, all but one of the parents born outside of Australia used urban centres.

The number of years respondents had had a child enrolled at their respective centre ranged from less than one year (27, 19.4%) through more than one but less than two years (25, 18.0%), more than two but...
less than three years (24, 17.3%), more than three but less than four years (25, 18.0%), more than four but less than five years (15, 10.8%), to five years or more (23, 16.5%). Most parents (99, 73.9%) had one child currently attending their centre, but a sizable proportion had two children in care (31, 23.1%), and four (3.0%) parents had three children in care. Children’s age ranged from 5 ($n=40$) to less than 1 year ($n=3$). The majority of children were aged 2 to 3 years ($n=75$) (note: five parents did not give their child’s age).

### Analysis

Responses to Question Two were coded according to whether participants mentioned or did not mention categories of elements purported to contribute to centre quality in the literature, namely structural elements (e.g. ratios, staff qualifications, facilities); process elements (e.g. caring relationships with children, educational programs, parent–staff communication); adult–work elements (e.g. opportunities for professional development, wages, work conditions); staff (e.g. teamwork); leadership; management; and auspice body. Responses were entered into SPSS Version 17 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, analysis of variance and chi-square tests were applied to the data to examine parents’ perceptions across the six centres. We also tested for differences in parents’ perceptions by gender, age, cultural background, qualifications, urban/rural location, years involved at the centre, the number of children attending the centre and age of their oldest enrolled child.

### Findings

**Question One:** Parents’ ratings of the overall quality of their centre.

Consistent with ECERS/ITERS and average accreditation ratings, the majority of respondents (113, 81.3%) rated their respective centres as high quality (5). A further 17.3 per cent of respondents rated their centre’s quality as good (4), with 1.4 per cent giving a satisfactory rating (3). No respondents considered that their centre’s provision of quality was minimal (2) or poor (1). The average rating of quality was 4.80 ($SD = 0.44$), with centre ratings ranging from 4.96 to 4.70. Statistical tests showed no difference in ratings between centres.

Ratings of quality were then examined to determine whether scores varied by parent age, gender, qualifications, cultural background, years of involvement with the centre, number of children at the centre or age of child, using correlation and analysis of variance. Findings showed no significant differences.

**Question Two:** Parents’ identification of elements that support high quality in their centre.

Respondents most commonly cited process elements (111, 79.9%) and staff characteristics (103, 74.1%) as contributing to the quality of their centre. More than 20 process elements were identified by parents, of which the most common were: emotionally secure and nurturing staff–child relationships (46, 33.8%); ongoing, warm and actively encouraged staff–parent communication (46, 33.8%); stimulating and fun activities that engaged the children (40, 29.4%); a child-centred approach to programming and curriculum (34, 25.0%); the facilitation of children’s learning (17, 12.5%); and support for parents (17, 12.5%). Other elements, identified by smaller numbers of parents, included the effective use of the environment, assistance provided for children with special needs, a positive approach to diversity, effective strategies for behaviour management, and good preparation for school.

Staff characteristics were described by seven aspects, of which respondents most often cited the high calibre, knowledge and professionalism of staff (51, 37.5%); their caring nature (44, 32.4%); their commitment (35, 25.7%); and their stability/low staff turnover (22, 16.2%). Other qualities of the staff that were mentioned by parents included experience, teamwork, and putting the centre’s philosophy into action.

Structural elements were cited by less than half (60, 43.2%) of all respondents. The provision of a healthy and safe environment (31, 22.8%), good staff–child ratios (20, 14.7%), and qualified staff (15, 11.0%) were most commonly noted as contributing to centre quality. Other structural elements cited included centre resources, equipment and facilities.

Other factors identified by parents as important to their centre’s provision of quality included features of adult–work (14, 10.1%) such as professional development, salaries, time for programming, and job satisfaction. Centre leadership and management were identified by a small number of respondents as important to their centre’s provision of quality, as was the not-for-profit status of the centre.

The most frequently identified areas of quality (process elements, staff characteristics, structural elements) were compared across the six case study centres, using cross-tabs and chi-square analyses. Findings presented in Table 3, Column 2, showed that process elements were mentioned by 74.2% to 94.1% of parents. There was no significant difference between the six centres, based on the chi-square statistic. Agreement on process elements was further demonstrated by examining frequencies across the six centres for each of the four process elements most commonly mentioned by parents: emotionally secure and nurturing relationships, staff–parent communication, the provision of stimulating and fun activities, and a child-centred approach. There was no difference in the proportion of parents who identified these elements.
The most notable difference between centres was parents’ identification of structural elements as important aspects of quality (see Table 3). Analyses at the item level also showed significant variation across centres for each of the three most important elements identified by parents: a healthy, safe environment, good staff–child ratios, and qualified staff. These differences are shown in Table 5.

### Table 3: Per cent of parents who identified process, staff and structural aspects of quality for the six participating centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Process elements</th>
<th>Staff characteristics</th>
<th>Structural elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre A (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre B (urban)</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>90.3%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre C (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre D (rural centre)</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre E (rural centre)</td>
<td>86.1%</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre F (rural centre)</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square test: $x = 4.7$, ns, $x = 14.42$, $x = 25.68$

In contrast, the contributing role of staff characteristics and structural elements to quality was perceived differently across centres, as shown by significant chi-square statistics (staff characteristics: $x = 14.42$, $p < 0.05$; structural elements: $x = 25.68$, $p < 0.01$). These differences were further explored by examining centre ratings for the staff characteristics most commonly mentioned by parents: high calibre, committed, caring, and stable. Results showed no differences in the proportion of parents who identified high-calibre and caring staff as elements of quality. Significant differences were noted, however, in parents’ identification of staff as highly committed and as stable (see Table 4).

### Table 4: Per cent of parents who identified committed/dedicated staff and long-serving/stable staff (low staff turnover) as elements of staff quality for the six participating centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Committed/dedicated staff</th>
<th>Long-serving/stable staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre A (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre B (urban)</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre C (urban, university centre)</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre D (rural centre)</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre E (rural centre)</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre F (rural centre)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square statistic: $x = 25.51$, $p < 0.001$, $x = 23.23$, $p < 0.001$

Further analyses were undertaken to examine whether parents’ identification of elements of quality differed by parent demographic characteristics. Initial tests focusing on the three broad areas (process, staff, structural elements) of quality showed no significant differences (using the criterion of $p < 0.05$) for parent age, gender, qualifications, cultural background, years of involvement with the centre, number of children at the centre, or age of child. Findings at the item level, however, identified a number of differences. Correlation analysis showed that older parents were more likely to identify committed staff ($r = .19$, $p ≤ 0.05$) as an element of quality. More highly educated parents were also more likely to mention committed staff ($r = .17$, $p ≤ 0.05$) and good staff–child ratios ($r = .30$, $p ≤ 0.05$), but less likely to mention staff–parent communication ($r = –.24$, $p ≤ 0.05$). Parents who were relatively new to the centre (fewer years of involvement) were more likely to mention caring staff ($r = –.20$, $p ≤ 0.05$). Chi-square tests showed that parents who were not born in Australia were more likely to mention staff–child ratios and a healthy, safe environment as supporting quality than were Australian-born parents ($x = 3.94$, $p < 0.05$ and $x = 5.78$, $p < 0.05$, respectively). Also, parents who had one child attending care were more likely to mention committed staff as a
component of quality than were parents with two or more children attending the centre ($x = 6.02$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Drawing on the sample of centres and parents in our study, this paper sought to investigate whether and in what ways parents who attend high-quality LDC are informed consumers of child care. Findings showed that parents’ understandings concurred with those of experts to a limited extent. Consistent with previous studies investigating parent perspectives (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Cryer et al., 2002; Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994; Ho, 2008; Shlay et al., 2005), respondents consistently identified the importance of process elements as contributing to centre quality, in particular nurturing and secure interactions and relationships, warm and ongoing parent–staff communication, stimulating and fun activities that engaged each child, a child-centred approach, and the facilitation of children’s learning.

Parent respondents, however, were less consistent in their identification of staff attributes and, to an even greater extent, structural and intangible elements. Consistent identification of the calibre and caring capacity of staff, but not of commitment and low staff turnover, may in part be explained by a possible primary focus of parents on their and their child’s experience at their centre. The provision of a nurturing, stimulating, learning and supportive environment may be more easily attributed to ‘face-value’ staff characteristics, such as how well staff appear to do their job and how caring they seem. This interpretation is consistent with the view that parents are generally uninformed and undiscerning consumers of child care.

Questionnaire findings also clearly showed that respondents had limited, though varying, understandings of the structural elements researchers have identified as providing the foundation of quality LDC. Consistent with previous research on parent perspectives (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; da Silva & Wise, 2006; Duignan, 2005), health and safety was the most identified structural element. No reference was made, however, to group sizes, and identification of staff qualifications and staff–child ratios was weak to moderate. This finding is also consistent with previous research that has highlighted parents’ limited knowledge of their centre’s staff–child ratios, group sizes, and staff qualifications (Shpancer et al., 2002). In addition, only a small number of respondents referred to less tangible contributors to quality (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2005), particularly strong leadership, adult-work elements, and centres’ not-for-profit status.

Overall, findings suggest that the parents in this study who used high-quality LDC were not, as a group, particularly well-informed consumers, although the limitations of using questionnaire responses to gauge in-depth understandings of parents’ knowledge of elements of centre quality need to be noted. However, findings also suggest that parent respondents are not a homogenous group, as their understandings of what contributes to centre quality varied to some extent by demographic profile. For example, newer users of LDC tended to cite caring staff as a quality element, while parents without university qualifications noted communication with staff as important. This finding is consistent with other studies that have found links between what parents value as quality and demographic variables. For example, links have been found between: parents with high levels of education and a desire for individual attention for their child (Shlay et al., 2005); parents with older children and learning opportunities (Shlay et al., 2005); and new arrivals and cultural sensitivity (da Silva & Wise, 2006). Similarly, Priest’s (2005) literature review emphasises the importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of incorporating cultural knowledge. Collectively, these findings suggest that parents’ assessment and understanding of centre quality may be both, if not more, value- rather than knowledge-based. In other words, parents’ assessment of centre quality may be particular to ‘what is important to me’, rather than knowledge of what experts agree is important for children’s development. This proposition warrants further investigation, particularly as it has the potential to reposition parent consumers of centre-based care in more complex ways than is currently recognised in much of the literature.

In addition to demographic variables, findings indicate that centre variables can impact on parents’ knowledge of quality in LDC. While all six case study centres had been rated as high quality, centre philosophies and practices varied from centre to centre, seemingly influencing parents’ understandings. For example, parents at Centres A and C cited staff–child ratios as an element of quality significantly more frequently, very likely because staff at both centres highlight the importance of low staff–child ratios in their promotion of the centre as high quality. Moreover, the parent questionnaire was administered at Centre C while it was heavily involved in a state-wide campaign to reduce staff–child ratios for children under two years of age from 1:5 to 1:4. Staff actively promoted the campaign within the centre and encouraged parental involvement. The impact of the parent education and advocacy work undertaken in these two centres, reflected in the significantly higher citing of ratios as an element that supports centre quality, suggests that parents’ understandings of ECEC quality can be influenced by centre-specific discourses. Interestingly, in an Australian study that investigated parents’ perceptions of staff–parent engagement (Elliott, 2003),...
participants expressed a common frustration, that their understanding of child development and early learning was limited when staff did not share their professional knowledge. Collectively, these findings suggest that there is scope for staff to play an active role in educating parents of the elements research has found enhance children’s developmental outcomes, thereby enhancing parents’ capacity to drive demand-led improvements for quality ECEC. Whether this educative role is a feature of high-quality centres more broadly requires further investigation. In the interim, the demonstrating of such leadership might usefully be considered as one feature of a Centre of Excellence under the proposed national Rating System.

A reading of the findings presented in this paper, and the discussion points raised, needs to be mindful of the limitations of this study. First is the low response rate, particularly from parents in rural areas, and the sample being drawn from a small number of centres, all of which were community based and externally rated as providing high-quality ECEC. The perspectives of parent users from a larger sample of LDC centres, including lower-quality and for-profit centres, requires further investigation. Second, the focus of this study was on gauging parents’ understandings in light of expert knowledge. Other qualitative methods such as focus group discussions may have greater potential to uncover parent conceptualisations of quality that differ from those held by researchers and professionals but which may be equally legitimate.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings raise some important considerations for conceptualisations of parents as potential drivers of improved quality LDC. Parents in this study exhibited strong confidence in their respective centre’s provision of quality, despite having limited knowledge of expert understandings. Does it matter, then, that parents’ knowledge of quality does not completely align with expert understandings? We would argue that it matters a great deal, particularly in the current political climate where proposed structural standards, notably qualifications and ratios, are hotly contested by major political parties and stakeholder groups, and where, despite repeated calls by advocates for workforce reforms, little has been done to advance those reforms. In the context of a marketised approach to LDC, pressure to keep quality standards to a minimum so as to curb parent fee increases will likely be more appealing to parents who are uninformed about the critical role structural and intangible elements play in the provision of high-quality LDC.

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for parents who are informed consumers to drive quality improvements in LDC. The findings of this study suggest potential for parents to become a powerful consumer advocacy force. In light of the trust and confidence displayed by parents in this study, high-quality centres appear well positioned to assist in realising this potential by playing a critical role in developing parents’ knowledge base about quality in LDC.

References


